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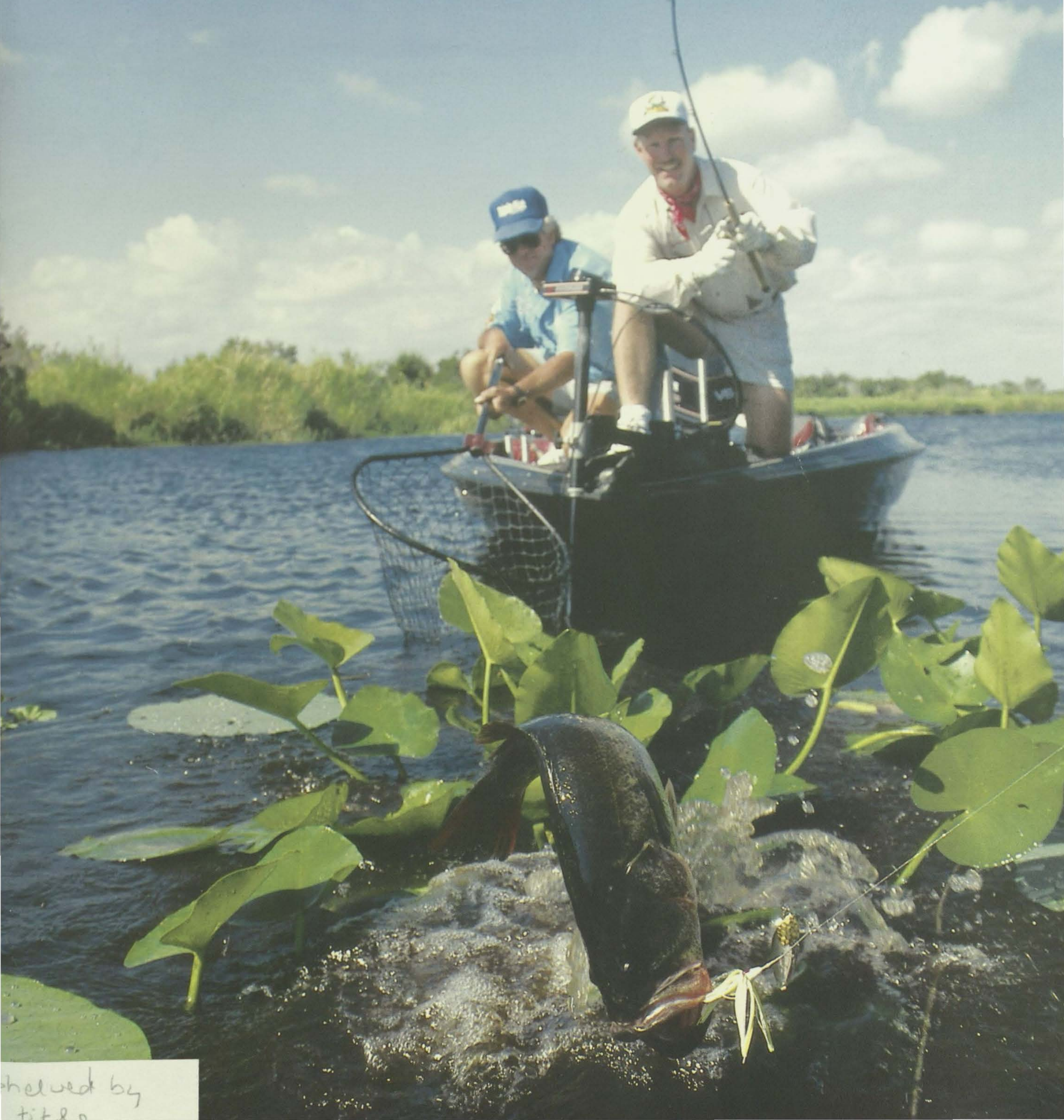

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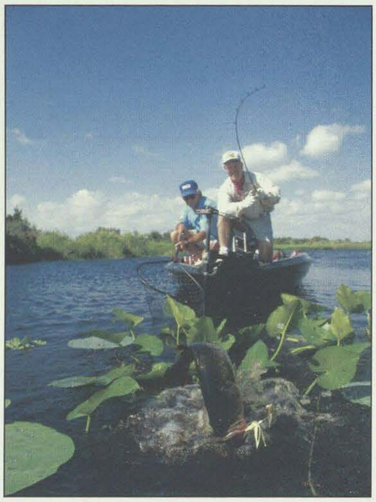
FLORIDA WILDLIFE May/June edition will celebrate 50 years of continuous publishing. A tribute to Marjorie Stoneman Douglas by James Huffstodt, Florida Jewels by Janisse Ray and a look at Andrews Wildlife Management Area by Dewey Weaver will be featured.



Front Cover: Bass fishing photo by Soc Clay.
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Cats For The Taking

Text and Photographs by Stanley H. Kirkland

Peering down into the swirling green water, Jimmy Bradley couldn't quite make out what he'd hooked. The Jackson County angler had fished many times from this same spot on the Jim Woodruff Dam catwalk on the Apalachicola River and had seen just about every fish in the river. But this one stumped him.

The next day a Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) fisheries biologist told him his fish was a flathead catfish, a species native to most of the West and Midwestern United States, including the Mississippi River. Bradley caught the 16.25-pound flathead on Aug. 4, 1982, and at the time it was theorized the fish had made its way down Georgia's Flint River, where there was a transplanted population, and into the Apalachicola.

It's been almost 15 years since Bradley made the first documented flathead catch in Florida. Today they're well entrenched in the Apalachicola and other panhandle waters, including Lake Seminole, the Chipola River, Ochlockonee River and Escambia River. While there's little argument it would have been better had they not set up shop here, the fact is they're here and anglers are learning they're fun to catch, and they're highly prized as a food fish. They can reach weights exceeding 100 pounds, and you have a fish many anglers can't resist going after.

What successful flathead anglers have learned is the fish is a voracious live-bait feeder, and live baits such as 4- to 6-inch bluegill or shellcracker fished in the many holes along the river bottom are a sure-fire rig.

There are many good flathead anglers, but two of the best I've encountered are Wayne Porter and his girlfriend, Lucretia Leath of Blountstown. Porter is a self-employed sawmill owner-operator, and years ago worked a short while as a state wildlife officer. Leath is the mother of four daughters and proudly says she was raised as an outdoors woman, learning to hunt and fish in Calhoun County at a young age.

Porter and Leath haven't been successful in just catching flatheads. They've become adept at boating quite a few hefty fish, including several 20- to 30-pound fish, and Leath's then state record 34-pound, 7-ounce lunker she caught April 15, 1995. Although Leath's record stood for only a week, it's something she still speaks of with pride.

Porter and Leath say the keys to flathead fishing are going at the right times, using the right tackle and knowing where to look for fish. They fish primarily from late spring into fall and more often than not, they fish from late afternoon into the night.

"Flatheads like to hang out in the holes in the daytime, and at night they'll leave the holes looking for something to eat," Porter said. "Basically though, they're just a lazy fish laying there on the bottom, like a vacuum cleaner waiting to suck up anything that comes by 'em. After dark they'll leave the holes, and we've caught them in water as shallow as 4 feet."

A typical fishing trip for the twosome involves launching Porter's 20-foot pontoon boat several hours before sundown and a quick run to a treetop or two to catch their bait, ideally 15 to 20 small bluegills. Then, it's down river from Blountstown and the use of their depthfinder to fish some of their well-known holes.

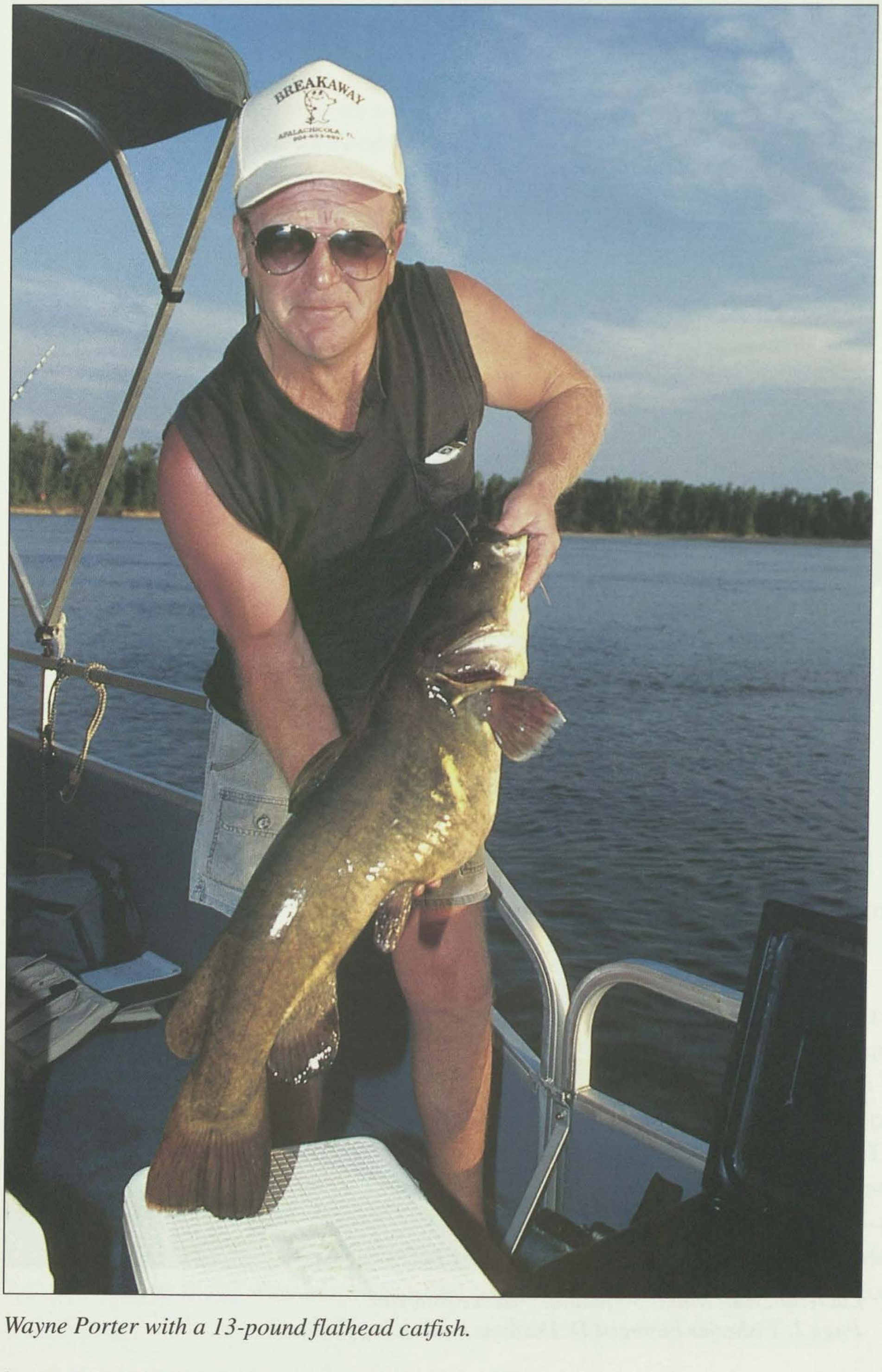
"Some of these holes can be 20- to 30-feet deep and hold fish, but holes that are as little as a foot or two deeper than the surrounding river bottom may hold fish too," he said. In deciding where to drop anchor, they look not only at the bottom contour but other indicators such as whether any bait fish were present and any success they've had in the past.

Porter and Leath have gained their expertise by trial and error, and one of the things they learned that is crucial is how you hook your bait. When they first started fishing more than six years ago, they used single-shank hooks and hooked their bait near the dorsal fin, like old-time bass anglers using shiners. It didn't take them long to figure out there had to be a better way, and then someone suggested a ballyhoo-style rig.

To rig ballyhoo style, Porter pushes a pencil-lead-thin wire through the mouth of the bream and out the anal vent, pulling the leader line. He then ties on a 2/0 or 3/0 Eagle Claw treble hook, snugs the hook up tight against his bait and he's ready to fish. He and Leath use ▷

Lucretia Leath with a 34-pound, 7-ounce flathead.
Page 2: Fisheries biologist D. Dobbins holds a big flathead.

Porter says flatheads bite really lightly and it's not uncommon for them to sit there with the bait for 5 to 10 minutes before you feel anything. "They won't jerk the rod out of your hands like a big saltwater fish."



Wayne Porter with a 13-pound flathead catfish.

Shimano 500 bail-type reels and 8-foot Daiwa rods spooled with 130 to 140-yards of 30-pound test line and 3-ounce egg weights fixed above barrel swivels. Porter estimates they lose 8 to 10 pounds of lead weights each year from hanging logs and other debris, but he says, "That's part of fishing."

Porter says flatheads bite really lightly and it's not uncommon for them to sit there with the bait for 5 to 10 minutes before you feel anything. "They won't jerk the rod out of your hands like a big saltwater fish. They bite more like a flounder than anything," he says.

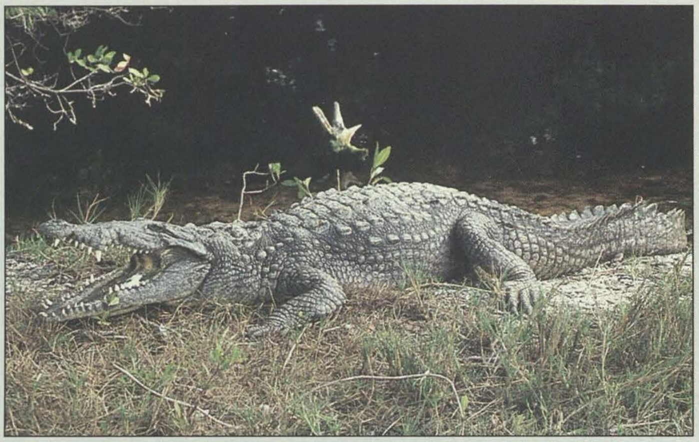
The popularity of flathead fishing is on the rise. That was aptly demonstrated last May when 154 anglers from north Florida, south Alabama and Georgia forked out $35 each to the Blountstown Rotary Club to compete in a one-day flathead fishing tournament on the Apalachicola River and vie for cash and an $8,000 boat and motor. Although no one caught a new state record flathead to win the boat and motor, the top finishers were awarded cash prizes as more than 1,000 pounds of flatheads were brought in. Needless to say, the Rotary Club plans to have another tournament this May.

There is a down side to the flatheads' arrival, however, and that is that they may disrupt some existing fish populations. Fisheries biologists in Georgia came to that conclusion after a five-year study on the Altamaha River and now a similar study is underway here in Florida on the Ochlockonee River. Biologists say the best thing anglers can do is learn to catch them, because they're not going away.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Bluegill and shellcracker caught by the angler may be used as bait on rod and reel or pole and line. However, no game fish may be used as bait on a trotline or bush hook.

Lt. Stan Kirkland is the public information director for the GFC's northwest region.

Delicate BALANCE



Species: American Crocodile
(*Crocodylus acutus*)
Florida Status: Endangered
Federal Status: Endangered

In an era when it's hard to come by good news concerning endangered species, the American crocodile brings a welcome change. Although still endangered, the crocodile population in southern Florida appears to be increasing, according to Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission biologist Paul Moler.

American crocodiles are restricted to the New World, specifically the southern tip of the Florida Peninsula, Key Largo, some Caribbean islands and the mainland from Mexico to Venezuela and on the Pacific coast from Mexico to Peru. Moler said the population outside the U.S. is fragmented, and therefore highly vulnerable to the threat of extinction.

The good news is that known crocodile nests, which averaged about 20 per year during the 1980s, have increased to 50. In his 1995 to '96 annual performance report concerning his crocodile research, Moler noted that the total known U.S. nesting of American crocodiles has slightly more than doubled during the past 17 years, and the bulk of the increase has taken place at Turkey Point (southern Biscayne Bay).

"And we're seeing more crocodiles – and evidence of nests for the first time in many decades – on the west coast of Florida, up to Ft. Myers," Moler said. "There have been infrequent sightings (but not nests) as far north as Tampa Bay."

Moler said there is more good news in that researchers are finding more female crocodiles among the estimated 500 to 1,000 animals still left in the wild. He said that's especially important since breeding females make up no more than 4 to 5 percent of the population.

"Crocodiles reach sexual maturity at 11 to 13 years," Moler said. "In a species with a delayed breeding age, the largest group in the populations typically is juveniles."

American crocodiles are easy to distinguish from alligators. Crocodiles have pointed snouts are grayish brown and mottled with black. Alligators have rounded snouts and are more dark olive in color.

Crocodiles have the potential to grow larger than alligators if they live long enough. The largest crocodile ever recorded was 15 feet, during the late 1800s. Old-timers tell tales of 20-footers, but confirmed evidence indicates that 17 to 18 feet may be the maximum length for the species.

Contrary to popular lore, American crocodiles are not more aggressive than alligators, and they feed mostly on crabs, fish, snakes, turtles, birds and small mammals. There are no recorded cases of American crocodile attacks on humans, although the potential does exist, especially when humans approach crocodile nests. Courtship and mating occur in late winter and early spring. Nesting occurs in late April or early May.

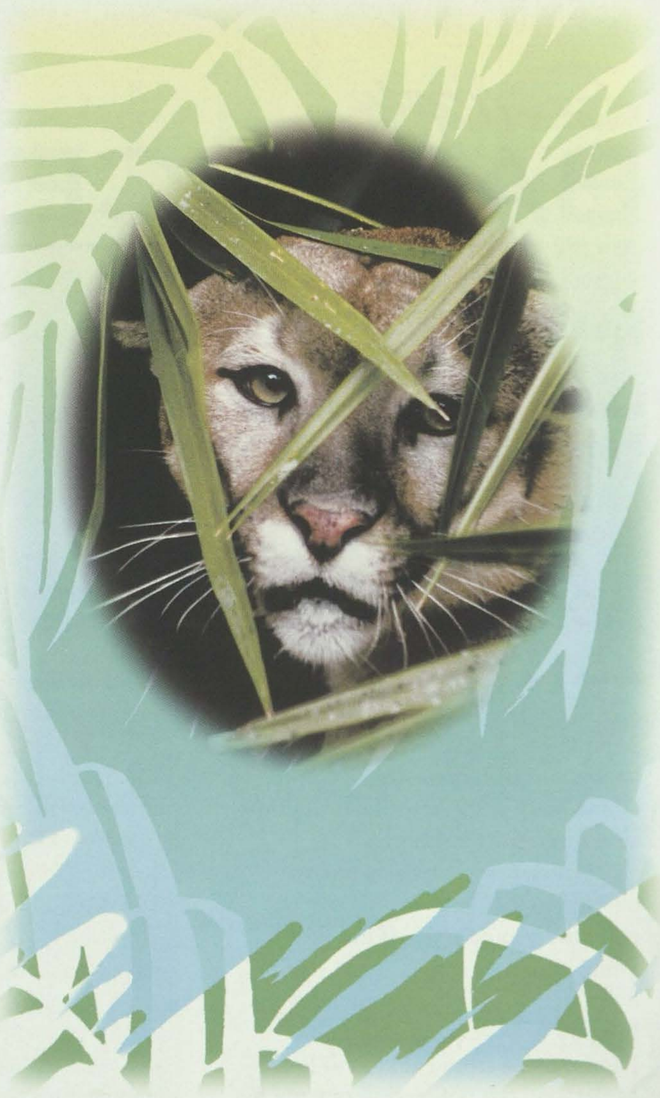
To view crocodiles in the wild, the best spots probably are northern Key Largo and around Florida Bay, into the 10,000 Islands vicinity. View them from a safe distance. Crocodiles occur most frequently in coastal swamps and rivers.

– Henry Cabbage

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE HEIDECKER

New Wildlife Crossings Help Protect the Florida Panther

By Mark Lotz



It was late at night and there were not many cars out on this lonely stretch of road. Without realizing it, the driver of a new Dodge pickup, sporting a Florida panther license plate, was speeding through a panther zone at 70 m.p.h. The roar of the truck did not seem to stop the panther from approaching the road. Suddenly and without warning... CLICK–FLASH. Another panther just had its picture taken in a wildlife crossing.

There's an ambitious project underway in south Florida to help save the endangered Florida panther. Wildlife crossings. These structures allow animals to walk beneath the flow of traffic to safely reach the other side of the road.

The first wildlife crossings in the state of Florida were installed when the two-lane State Road 84, also known as Alligator Alley, was upgraded as an extension of I-75. They were placed in areas where panthers were known, through radio-telemetery data and locations of road kills, to cross the road. In addition, a 10-foot-high fence was erected to prevent animals from going around the crossings. Since the crossings have been in place, not a single panther has been hit in this area. Five Florida panthers had been killed on the alley in the 6 years before the crossings were in place.

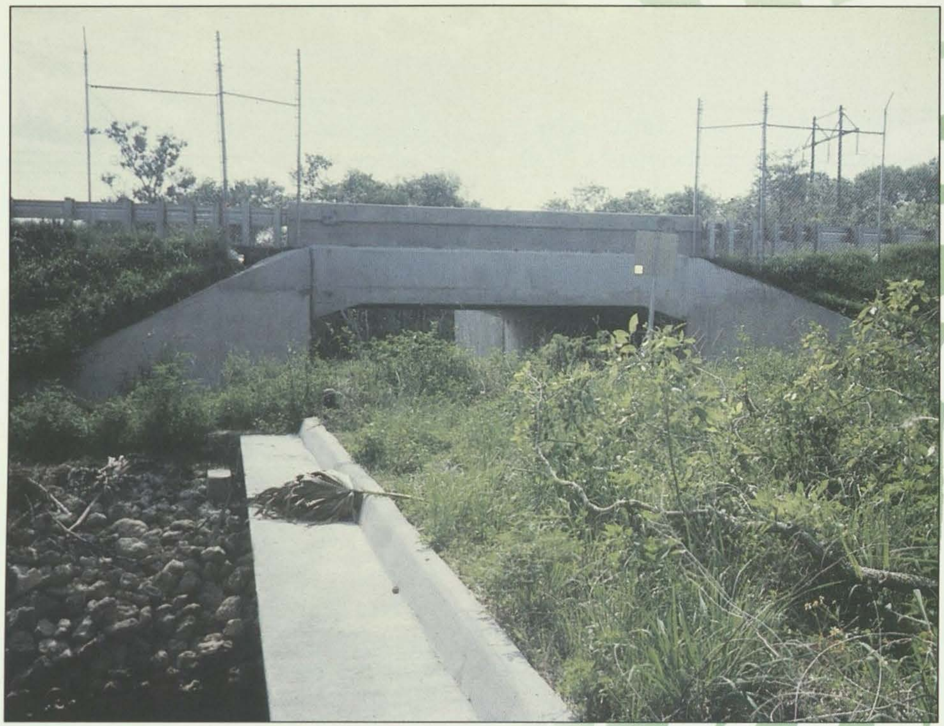
> **Since the crossings have been in place, not a single panther has been hit by vehicles in this area. Five Florida panthers had been killed on the alley in the 6 years before the crossings were built.**

Wildlife crossings not only protect panthers, but other species of wildlife as well. Everything from alligators to wading birds have used the crossings on I-75. But animals aren't the only benefactors; people also benefit. Hitting a large animal such as a deer can cause hundreds of dollars worth of vehicle damage. Three people also lost their lives after striking or trying to avoid colliding with animals along this same section of highway.

In order to protect people and wildlife, the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commisssion (GFC) entered into a cooperative research program with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to determine the proper design and placement of these wildlife crossings. "We're leading the nation in design, implementation and research of wildlife crossings." said Gary Evink of FDOT.

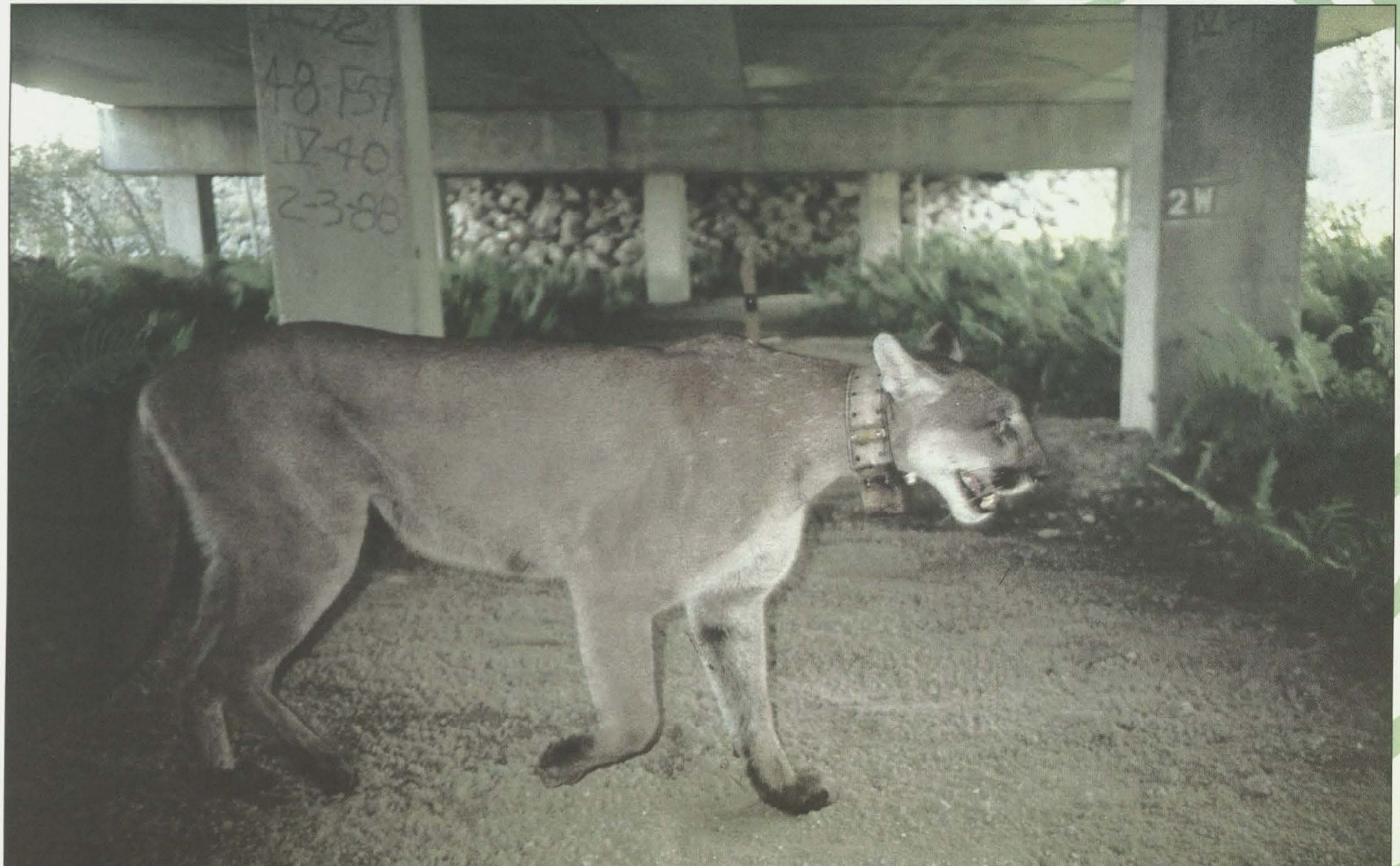
Two wildlife crossings of a different design were recently installed along a stretch of S.R. 29 just north of I-75. These have been the subject of a recent study by the GFC. The use of these new structures had to be evaluated to determine if they were satisfactory as an additional design of wildlife crossing. Funding for this study was provided ▷

PAGE 6 PHOTO BY CHARLIE HEIDECKER, DESIGNED BY PEGGY PERKERSON



MARK LOTZ

The wildlife crossings on S.R. 29 are 8-feet high, 24-feet wide and 48-feet long. Complete with a bridge across the adjoining canal, they were completed in March 1995.



MARK LOTZ

Female Florida panther number 54 regularly uses the wildlife crossings on I-75 to go between the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve and the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge.

through a cooperative effort between FDOT and the GFC's Florida Panther Research and Management Trust Fund.

Game monitors were used to document animal use. These monitors consisted of three parts; a transmitter and receiver connected to a camera. An infrared beam passes between the transmitter and receiver and a picture is taken of whatever crosses the beam. In addition, the time and date are recorded. These units were so sensitive that even a moth triggered one. Of course, the subjects of our interests were the Florida panther and other large mammals such as deer and bear.

The wildlife crossings on S.R. 29 are different from the ones on I-75 in several ways. First, they are installed on a two-lane highway as opposed to a four-lane divided highway. Second, they are a precast concrete structure that is assembled in sections and resembles more of a large tunnel. The crossings on I-75 are a bridge style. And the S.R. 29 structures are less expensive; $110,000 as compared to the $175,000 (1986 construction price) structures on the alley.

The good news is that practically everything used these new wildlife crossings. Whether it walked, crawled or flew, we have pictures of it. Panthers, bears, deer, bobcats, raccoons, otters, armadillos, several species of wading birds and other small creatures all became immortal through the lens of the camera.

And animals didn't seem to be bothered by the flashing camera. There were two bobcats in particular that crossed frequently. It was a matter of routine for them to cross the road using the wildlife crossing then return a short time later. This continued for several months.

The same principles apply to the placement of wildlife crossings as in real estate; location, location, location. As mentioned earlier, our knowledge of where panthers crossed the alley and S.R. 29 was used to determine exactly where the structures should be placed. This led to a quick acceptance and use of the structures.

Currently, three radio-collared panthers and one Texas cougar, released for genetic restoration purposes, regularly use the wildlife crossings. Male Florida panther number 54, female number 57, and TX 104 frequently use the crossings to cross I-75 between the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) to the north and the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve to the south. Male panther number 51 also previously made regular use of the I-75 crossings but has recently shifted his home range a bit due to the death of

MARK LOTZ

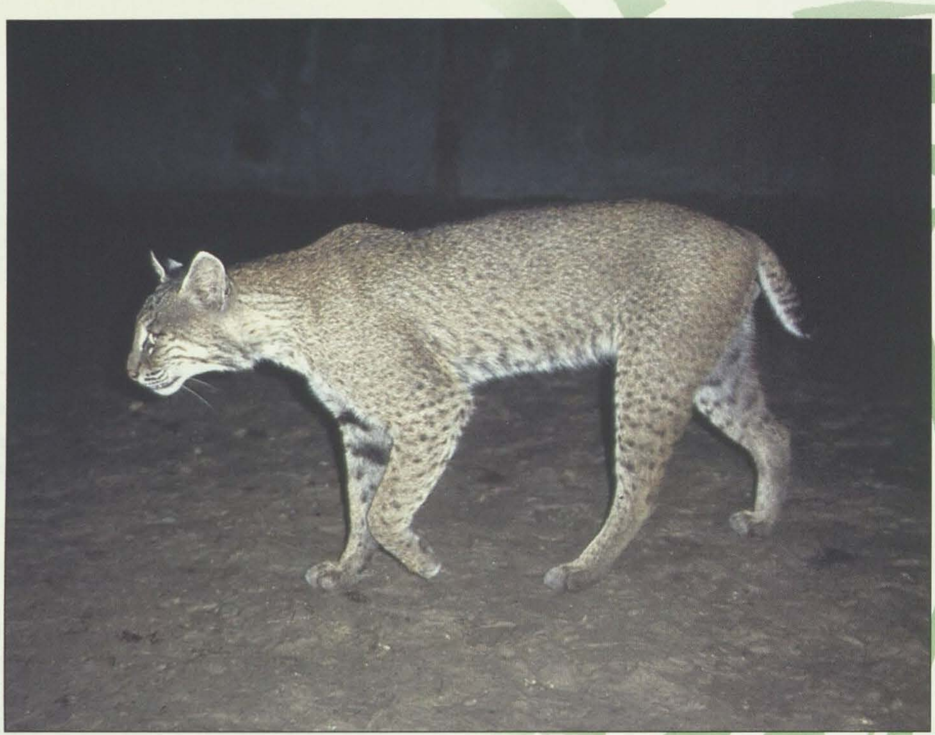
A fawn is captured on film seconds after its mother went through.

male panther number 12. Number 51 has used the S.R. 29 wildlife crossing on several occasions while traveling in his new range, which covers the FPNWR to the west and the Bear Island Unit of Big Cypress National Preserve to the east. Male panther number 12 not only utilized the I-75 wildlife crossings while he was alive, but also used the S.R. 29 crossings while they were still under construction. In addition to these "regulars," female panther number 32 and TX 101 have used the crossings to a lesser extent.

Several other stories were played out on film. Entire rolls of film were used up as various wading birds foraged for fish as water levels dropped. Raccoons were photographed as well searching for food left by the drying waters. Yet another interesting scenario occurred one day as a gray fox passed through. A dozen or so pictures tell the story of how this fox spotted a glass lizard and presumably ate it. Of course, none of this would have been captured on film if the fox would have run into the lizard another foot away. But luckily it all happened in the infrared beam.

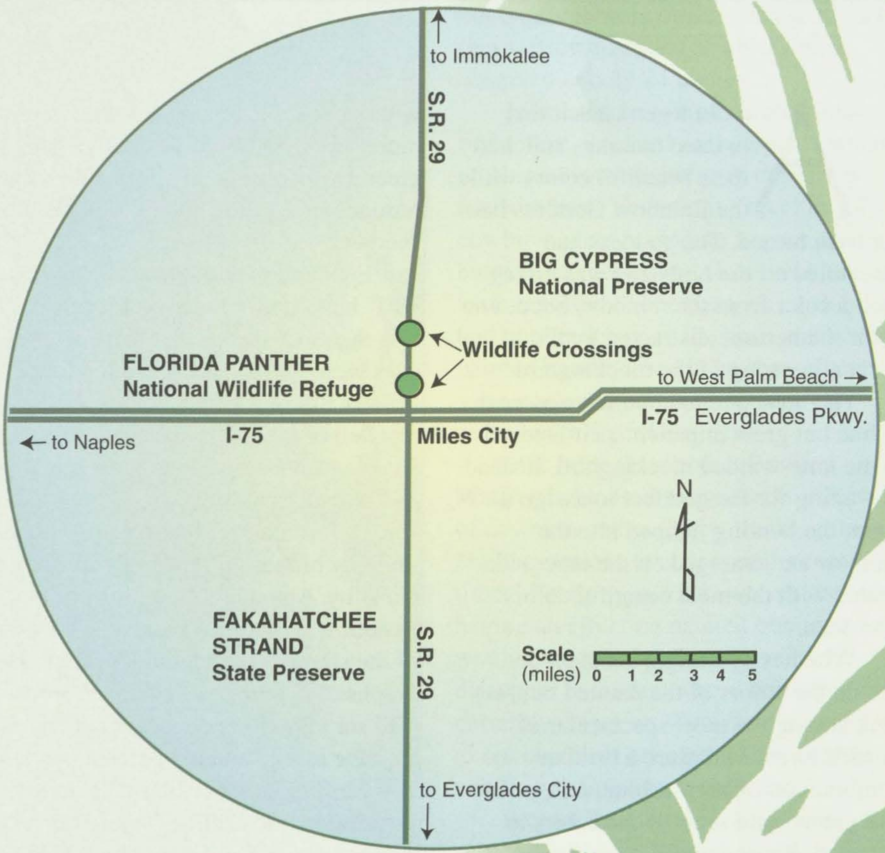
The main question we were trying to answer was, do these wildlife crossings work? Over 1,000 pictures say they do. Wildlife crossings have been so successful that several others are planned throughout the state. Currently, there are 36 wildlife crossings (including bridge extensions) on I-75, two on S.R. 29, one on Corkscrew road in Lee county, and one on S.R. 46 in Lake county which was built primarily to accommodate black bears. A bridge style wildlife crossing is currently under construction on S.R. 29 south of I-75 near Copeland. Other wildlife crossings are proposed on U.S. 1 between Florida City and Key Largo and on Big Pine Key where roadkills are the primary mortality factor for the Key deer. Florida panthers and other wildlife are much safer when they cross the road these days through our wildlife crossings.

Mark Lotz is a GFC biological scientist stationed in Naples.



MARK LOTZ

It's likely that this bobcat's territory was divided by S.R. 29. This wildlife crossing provided an opportunity to safely cross many times while roaming its territory.



New State Road 29 Wildlife Crossings

Project Bunting Watch

By Jim Cox
Art by Honey Hilliard

> "These birds breed along a narrow strip of the Atlantic Coast from Merritt Island north to North Carolina. If the population declines continue, painted buntings could be eliminated much more quickly than other declining songbirds whose breeding ranges cover much of the eastern U.S."

An old legend has it that painted buntings snitched their beautiful colors while the Rainbow Goddess had her back turned. The goddess had assembled all the birds and was giving each a color from the rainbow, but at one point she became distracted by the enchanting song of the mockingbird.

The male painted bunting was next in line but grew impatient as it listened to the long-winded mockingbird. Instead of waiting for the goddess to assign a color, the bunting jumped into the rainbow and emerged on the other side coated with the most beautiful colors ever seen.

Whether by design, accident or deceit, the colors of the painted bunting rank among the most spectacular of Florida birds. Males are a brilliant combination of purple, blue, red, yellow and green - and most of the colors in between. Early naturalists paid special tribute to this colorful symphony by naming the bird "nonpareil," or "that without equal." Female colors are a bit more subtle, but their distinctive pale green feathers certainly attract notice and remind some of the color of lemon-lime sherbet.

Encounters with Florida's "rainbow bird" have startled many a Floridian. "It was the most spectacular thing we had ever seen," M.C. and Amanda Morgan, Project Bunting Watch volunteers, recalled of their first sighting several years ago. "We rushed to get a picture of this magnificent bird."

Unfortunately sightings of Florida's rainbow bird are increasingly difficult to come by. Among the songbirds of the eastern U.S., painted buntings show one of the sharpest population declines. The graphs of abundance developed from bird surveys stoop downward at an average rate of about 4 percent per year. If framed in terms of Florida's human population, the declines would be comparable to the loss of about half-a-million people each year.

"Concern for buntings runs very high," says Alexander Kropp, the birding project manager with the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's (GFC) Division of Wildlife. "These birds breed along a narrow strip of the Atlantic Coast from Merritt Island north to North Carolina. If the population declines continue, painted buntings could be eliminated much more quickly than other declining songbirds whose breeding ranges cover much of the eastern U.S."

Biologists also worry that the significance of these declines is poorly appreciated since a larger and more stable population of painted buntings occurs in the western U.S. However, recent research suggests eastern and western painted buntings may be distinctive species.

"There is no genetic exchange between the two populations," Kropp notes. "The populations have distinctive song types, they migrate to different spots during winter, and they even undergo molts at different times of the year.

"We may be losing more than a colorful bird; we may be losing a unique species."

Several suspects stand out to explain the decline in buntings. Loss of coastal breeding habitats to development certainly stands high on the list. About 70 percent of Florida's human population lives near the coast, so natural communities in coastal areas have seen dramatic losses.

Another prominent suspect is a drab, dusty brown bird at the opposite end of the color spectrum from painted buntings: female brown-headed cowbirds. They lay their eggs in active nests and often carry off any eggs that the legitimate owner has placed there.

The unsuspecting foster parents raise the young cowbirds along with any of their own young, but cowbirds are not particularly kind to their nest-mates. The interlopers often kick legitimate nestlings overboard or out-muscle them for food.

Historically brown-headed cowbirds were not one of the breeding birds found in Florida. Cowbirds came to Florida in winter, but the birds bred primarily in open rangeland found in the western U.S. But as more and more forest land was cleared in the eastern U.S., cowbirds began to expand their breeding range to the east.

TOM J. ULRICH

Living color on the wing: the painted bunting.

"It is interesting to note that the declines in painted buntings appear to begin in the 1970s, a time when brown-headed cowbirds were just beginning to breed in Florida," Kropp says. "Sightings of adult painted buntings feeding young cowbirds are now commonplace along Florida's Atlantic coast."

To help gather information on the status of buntings and to identify the reasons for declines, the GFC launched "Project Bunting Watch" in 1996. Volunteers in 10 counties in northeast Florida (the extent of the Florida breeding range) monitored their backyard bird feeders for painted buntings, cowbirds and other species. Information collected by the volunteers was then used to map the breeding distribution of painted buntings across the study area, assess possible factors contributing to the species' decline (such as cowbird parasitism) and assess characteristics of feeder stations that attract buntings and other species.

"Approximately 300 people within the 10-county study area contacted the GFC concerning bunting watch," Kropp says. "Data was received from 87 homes, but buntings were observed at only 35 of these. Brown-headed cowbirds were observed at only 24 homes.

Interestingly, young painted buntings were observed only in yards where cowbirds were absent or in extremely low numbers. You might expect this if cowbirds were having an impact on bunting reproduction. Also, cowbirds were reported in one yard where they had not been seen in the past, and young painted buntings had been seen. There were no young painted buntings observed in this yard last year.

"We hope that Project Bunting Watch can be used to assess the effects of cowbirds indirectly by tracking these feeding stations over longer periods of time," Kropp says. "If cowbirds are having an effect on painted buntings, we would expect to see buntings slowly disappear at feeders where both species currently co-occur. We would also expect to see cowbirds at some feeders where now only buntings are recorded."

Project Bunting Watch data also helped to show that buntings gradually increased their visitation rates to feeders through late July and early August and ▷

then dropped off sometime in mid-August. There were also some interesting differences in the rates at which male and female buntings visited feeders: females appeared in greater numbers later in the season while males appeared in greater numbers earlier in the season.

These differences fall in line with aspects of bunting biology. Male buntings feed young birds while females initiate a second nesting attempt. Males may have been occupied feeding fledged young later in the breeding season and reduced their visits to feeders. Alternatively, females may have increased their visitation rates in preparation for a second round of egg-laying and incubation.

Project Bunting Watch data also suggest that certain feeders and seed types can influence the rates of visitation by buntings and cowbirds.

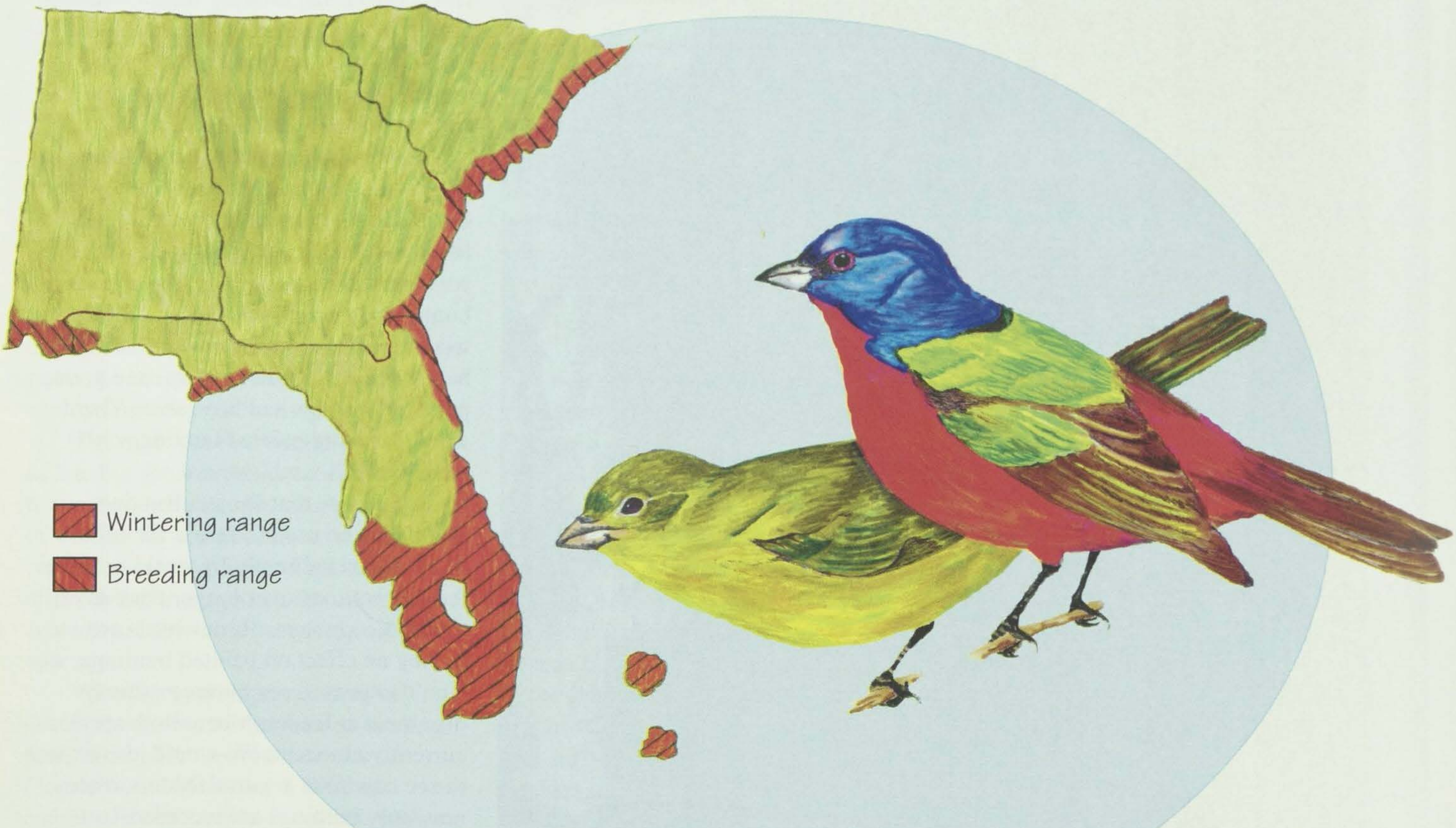
"Such data may some day prove helpful in designing feeding stations that are attractive to buntings and hostile to cowbirds," Kropp suggests.

The GFC is currently evaluating the data collected in "Project Bunting Watch" in its first year and deciding how to refine aspects of the program. Some possible improvements under consideration are adding bird identification inserts to the data-collection manual and also developing better methods of quantifying characteristics of bird feeders and yards.

"Project Bunting Watch appears to provide valuable data at a nominal cost," Kropp concludes. "More importantly, it engages the public in an important conservation issue and makes them aware of the plight of painted buntings in Florida. This, in turn, will greatly help this agency implement future management programs that address the problems facing this wonderful slice of the rainbow."

The GFC needs hundreds of additional volunteers to make Project Bunting Watch 1997 a success. The only requirements for participation are that you live within the 10-county study area of the project (Nassau, Duval, Baker, Clay, St. Johns, Putnam, Flagler, Volusia, Seminole and Brevard counties), that you have a bird feeder, and that you know your backyard birds. For information on how to participate, contact Alexander Kropp, Birding Projects Manager, Division of Wildlife, GFC, 620 South Meridian Street, Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600, or call (904) 414-7929.

Jim Cox is a nongame program biologist with the GFC's Office of Environmental Services in Tallahassee.



Painted Bunting Breeding and Wintering Range

Hunting and Fishing License STREAMLINED

By Dick Sublette, editor

The first major overhaul of the licensing system at the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission in more than 10 years offers anglers and hunters a "universal license."

Purchasing a license to fish or hunt is getting much easier in Florida. The first major overhaul of the licensing system at the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) in more than 10 years offers anglers and hunters a "universal license." The new license will be a single card listing all the privileges the consumer purchases.

All county tax collectors and their subagents are issuing the new universal card. The new card enables all license sellers to offer all license options. "There no longer will be an inventory problem," explained Pete Joiner, GFC director of administrative services. "Each county tax collector and subagent is empowered to issue the full gamut of permits for hunting, freshwater fishing and saltwater fishing right on the spot. And all the licenses and permits will be included on just one card," according to Joiner.

Susan Wood, GFC chief of licenses and permits, explained that there are four new approaches to purchasing a license or permit in Florida in 1997:

- **Universal License**, currently available at all county tax collectors and their subagents. The new license will easily fit in a billfold.

- **Computerized License**, an automatic system to be available initially in 30 counties. Tax collectors will be able to computer-generate licenses with a license number.

- **Telephone Purchase**, a toll-free telephone option will soon be available to purchase a license or permit via a 1-800 number from anywhere in the United States. This service will be available later this spring.

- **Internet Transaction** will enable anyone with access to the Internet and a major credit card to obtain a license or permit immediately. Access will be through the GFC's home page at **http://www.state.fl.us/gfc/**

"Once the phone purchase and the Internet transaction are up and running you may purchase a license anytime 24 hours a day, seven days a week from anywhere in the USA," explained Joiner. "You won't have to wait in line at a county office or be concerned about an agent's location and office hours."

The new toll-free telephone and Internet services will issue a county fee to the Florida county of origination.

"A more efficient and effective data base will result from the four new license services," according to Joiner. "For the first time the GFC will be able to construct a demographic profile of where the anglers and hunters are located. Surveys to help administer hunting and fishing services and policy will be targeted to specific in-state license holders."

Wood said the 1996 Legislature approved the changes to enable the GFC to offer more convenient methods of license sales and eliminate license categories that produced almost no revenue.

Wood adds, "Florida is now offering non-residents a three-day freshwater fishing license for $5, and a trapping license will cost $25 for resident and non-resident. Residents 65 years old or older will have the option to carry a free senior citizen license or carry proof of age and residency.

"Another important change involves hunters from Georgia," Wood said. "They will be able to purchase 10-day nonresident hunting licenses for $25 rather than the $121 they paid in the past."

With the four new methods of obtaining hunting and fishing permits Florida is becoming the leader in user-friendly purchasing of licenses.

Striped and Sunshine Bass Offer Great Fishing

By Mark A. Trainor
Photographs by William A. Greer

The Sunshine State is famous for its year-round fishing. However, many anglers are not aware that many Florida lakes and rivers provide spectacular striped and sunshine bass fishing.

During fall and winter, sunshines and stripers begin feeding actively as water temperatures in lakes, rivers and reservoirs cool. The fishing remains good for these two types of bass through early, to mid spring.

Not all Florida lakes and rivers support striped bass or the related hybrid, sunshine bass. However, waters that have been stocked by the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provide anglers excellent fishing.

> **While the striped bass is a naturally occurring fish, sunshine bass are hybrids produced by crossing white bass and striped bass by GFC biologists at hatcheries.**

While the striped bass is a naturally occurring fish, sunshine bass are hybrids produced by crossing white bass and striped bass by GFC biologists at hatcheries.

Stripers can reach weights of up to 60 pounds and are renowned for their aggressive behavior. Sunshine bass may exceed 12 pounds and are also known for their fighting ability. Striper populations in lakes Talquin and Seminole (in Gadsden and Jackson counties) and the Apalachicola, St. Johns, St. Marys, Blackwater, Nassau and Ochlockonee rivers in north Florida provide anglers with opportunities to catch plenty of big fish.

The St. Johns River consistently produces the best striper fishing in the state. Stripers hang around the jetties and the bombing range on Lake George, at the I-295 bridge (Buckman Bridge), and at the railroad bridge in downtown Jacksonville.

The Nassau and St. Marys rivers, north of Jacksonville, also offer good striper fishing, with March and May the peak months. Fishing around creek mouths and bridge pilings near U.S. 17 and I-95 bridges is productive.

In northwest Florida, the Apalachicola River and Lake Seminole provide excellent striper fishing. The best fishing occurs in March and April at the Jim Woodruff Dam and its tailrace, where water discharges from it in Chattahoochee. Both bank and boat fishing afford good opportunities to hook large stripers.

In addition, Lake Talquin and the Ocklockonee River tailrace near Tallahassee also offer good fishing for stripers during February, March and April.

The Apalachicola River and Lake Seminole provide the best sunshine bass fishing in the state. It is not uncommon to catch 5- to 8-pound sunshine bass below the Jim Woodruff Dam on the Apalachicola River from January to May.

Recent stockings by the GFC in Newnans Lake near Gainesville have produced an excellent sunshine bass fishery. The best place to fish in the lake is around the two fish attractor buoys (one is directly off Palm Point and the other is near the center of the lake).

Big sunshines also can be found in the creek mouths on Newnan's north shore, especially when the creeks are flowing after a heavy rain. Anglers casting rattletraps and plastic jigs have been most successful.

Other popular sunshine bass fishing opportunities occur from the Escambia River in northwest Florida to Lake Osborne in West Palm Beach.

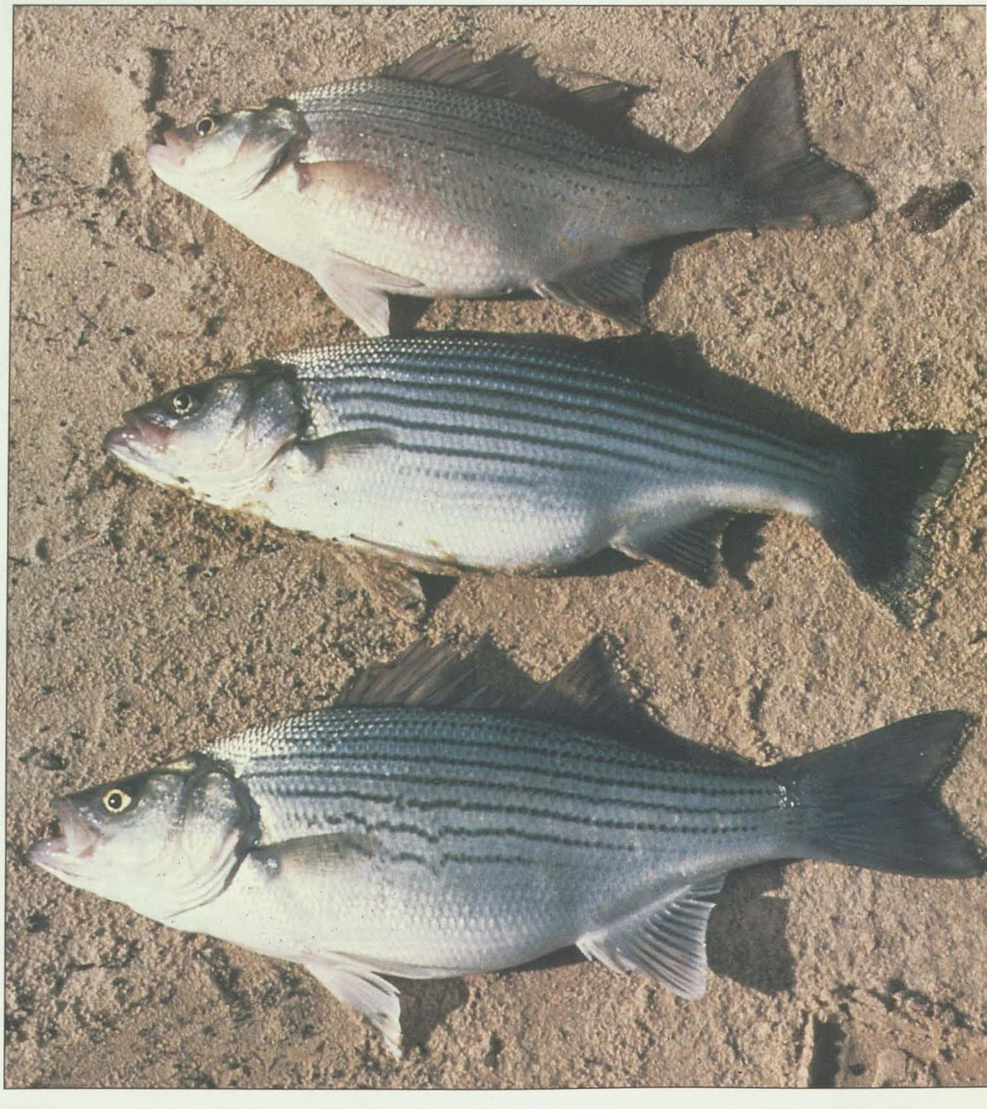
It's best to use heavy line (12- to 20-pound test) with live bait or a variety of artificial lures. By far live shad and skipjack herring are the most popular baits for catching large sunshines and stripers. White or yellow jigs (1/8 ounce to 1 1/2 ounces) and spoons for swift river currents and surface plugs and crank baits for schooling fish may also be used.

Anglers occasionally fly-fish for stripers and sunshines by using 8 1/2- to 9-foot rods that handle number 9- or 10-weight line. When fly-fishing in rivers and tailraces, sinking/shooting heads for deep-fishing flies are good choices.

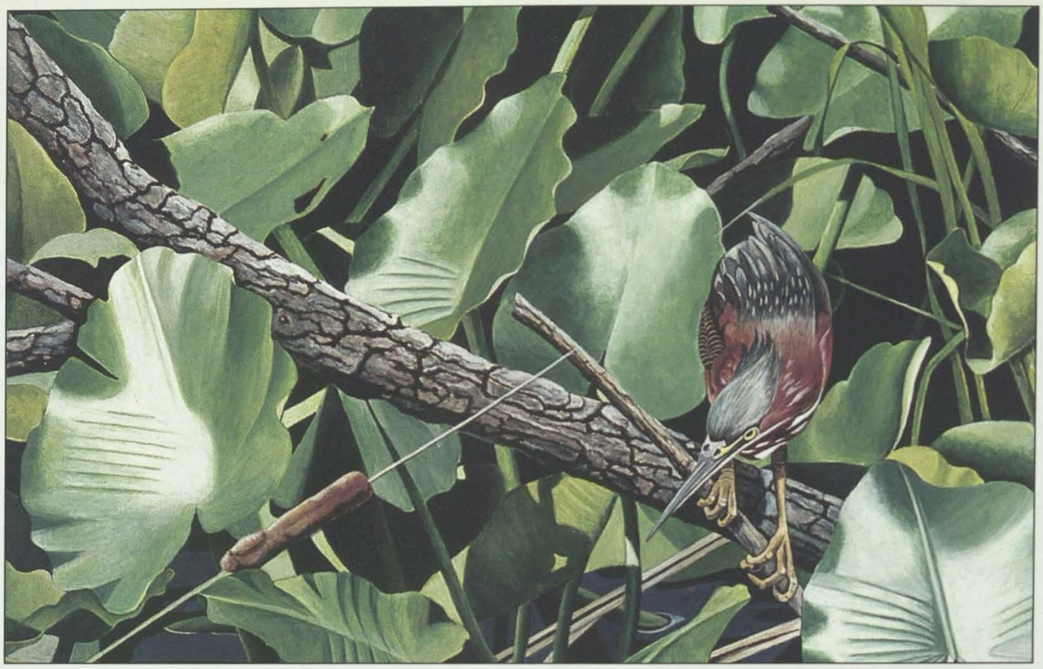
Sunshines closely resemble stripers, making identification sometimes very difficult. The striper tends to have a more streamlined body and head with continuous unbroken lines extending to the fold in the tail. Sunshines generally have a deep body shape with lines that are broken and irregular and do not extend to the fold in the tail.

For current fishing regulations for sunshine and striped bass consult the 1996-97 Freshwater Sport Fishing Guide and Regulations Summary. This publication is available at county tax collectors' offices or their subagents, which include many bait and tackle stores and retail outlets that sell fishing tackle and licenses. You can also call 1-800-ASK-FISH for an update on regulations and places to fish, or visit the GFC's web site at http://www.state.fl.us/gfc/

Mark Trainor is a public information specialist in the GFCs Tallahassee office.



From top to bottom: white, striped and sunshine bass.
Page 14: Sunshine bass can be found at the Jim Woodruff Dam in Chattahoochee.



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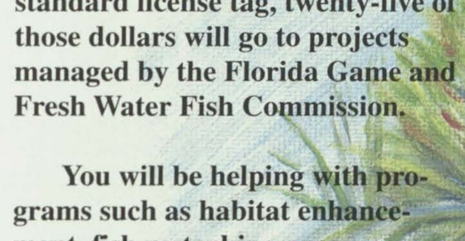


This one's a keeper!

painting by peggy perkerson

Is Your Turkey A Trophy?

By Lt. Rip Stalvey

"Florida is one of few states where you can hunt two different types of turkeys. Also, it's the only place you'll find the Osceola."

Congratulations! You've worked hard for it. Done your homework and just bagged what you think could be a trophy gobbler. Now how do you find out if your gobbler is something to brag about?

I recently put that question to Brad Gunn, a Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) wildlife biologist whose specialty is the wild turkey. Here's what he had to say: "I frequently get calls from hunters who think they might have a trophy turkey and want to know how to find out for sure."

Florida has two subspecies of wild turkeys, so Gunn must first determine which subspecies was bagged. In Florida's panhandle, you'll find the eastern subspecies. Further down the state is where you'll find the Osceola subspecies.

To find out which subspecies a hunter bagged, Gunn usually starts out by asking what part of the state the turkey came from.

"Florida is one of few states where you can hunt two different types of turkeys. Also, it's the only place you'll find the Osceola. Many hunters come here from other states just to hunt the Osceola subspecies," Gunn said.

Wildlife biologists have drawn an imaginary line that meanders from Duval County southeast to Dixie County. If you travel north and west of that line, the turkeys are considered eastern. If a bird comes from south of that line, they'll call your turkey an Osceola. The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) uses the same line for record keeping and trophy recognition.

All the wildlife biologists I spoke with say the two subspecies frequently interbreed. This can make positive identification difficult at times.

Just remember, the further your turkey was from the line, the better chance you have of having a pure bird of either subspecies.

Gunn will probably ask you about

CHARLIE HEIDECKER

your bird's wings. Although, like most biologists, he'd like to see them in person, just to be sure.

"I'm particularly interested in the barring on the gobbler's wings," Gunn said. "This, of course, is easiest to see after you've bagged your gobbler," he added with a wry smile.

All wild turkeys have black-and-white barring patterns on their wing flight feathers. On the eastern subspecies, the barring is sharp and distinct and the white bars are wide. The wings of the Osceola are much darker, because the barring is not as distinct and the white bars are narrower.

Is there a system for bird hunters to score turkeys like other hunters do deer? If you ask Gunn, he'll tell you there is.

"The NWTF developed the basic scoring system most used today," Gunn said.

A turkey's score is based on a combination of weight, spur length and length of the beard. See the sidebar "Scoring Your Turkey" for details on how to score your gobbler.

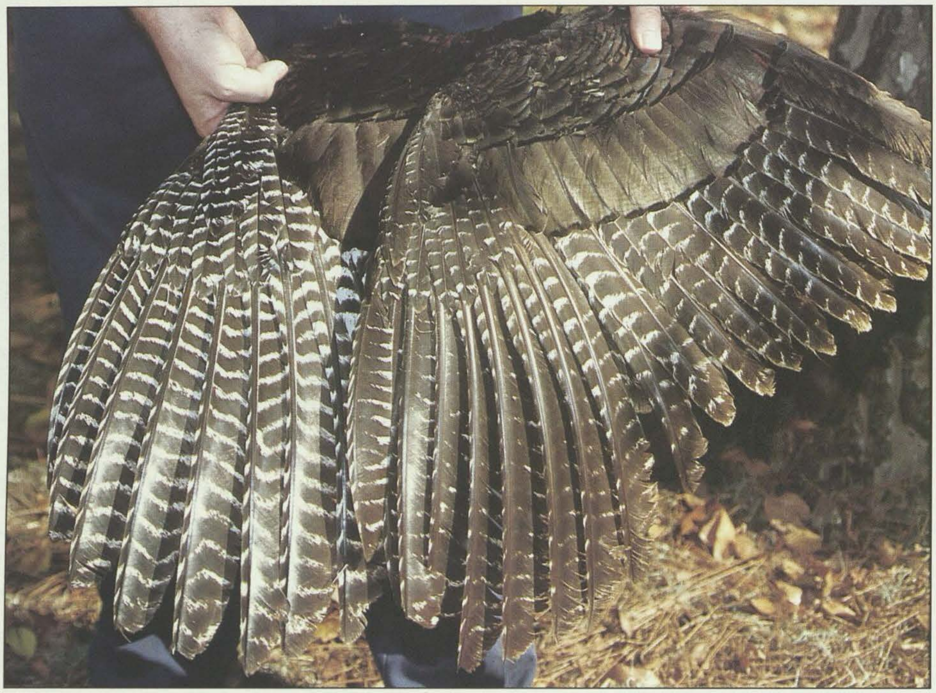
If you're a member of the NWTF and your gobbler ranks high enough, they'll recognize it as a trophy bird. Although there's no trophy or money involved, for most, the prestige is recognition enough. The NWTF doesn't recognize birds taken by nonmembers.

When it comes right down to answering the question about a particular turkey being a trophy or not, Gunn had a ready answer.

"Hunters work hard to bag a turkey. Any turkey you harvest can be considered a real trophy," Gunn said.

Lt. Rip Stalvey is the public information director of the GFC's South region.

Page 18: An Osceola gobbler.
Page 19: Eastern (left) and Osceola (right) turkey wings.



LT. RIP STALVEY

Scoring Your Turkey

By Lt. Rip Stalvey

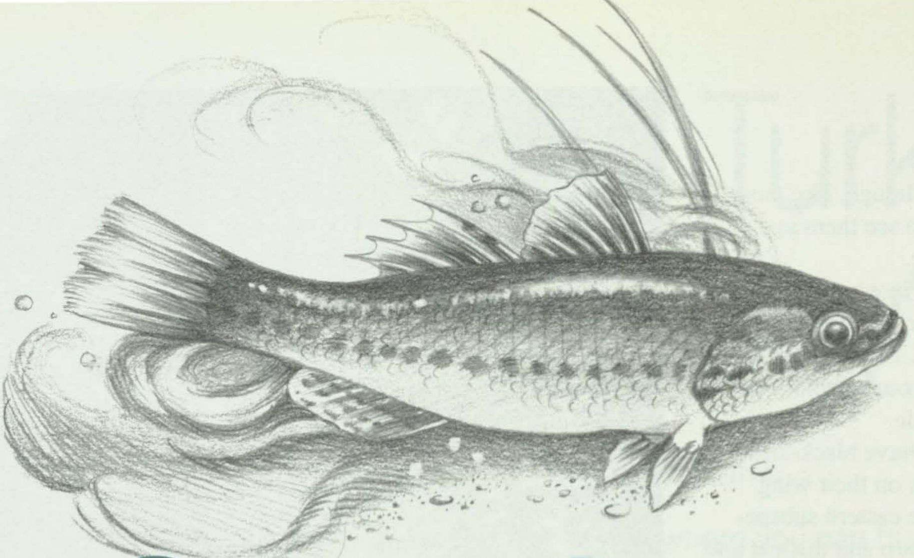
So you've bagged your turkey and you want to know how to score it. Here's the method used by the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) to recognize trophy gobblers taken by its members.

Weigh your gobbler to the nearest ounce, on scales certified accurate by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

- Measure the length of both spurs to the nearest 1/16 of an inch.
- Measure the length of your gobbler's beard to the nearest 1/16 of an inch. Measure from the center of the beard where it exits the skin to the end of the longest bristle.
- All weights and measurements must be converted to decimals gobblers score.
- Multiply the total of both spur lengths by ten to get the total points for the spurs. Then multiply the beard's length by two to get the total points for the beard. Add the above two figures to the gobbler's weight to get your bird's score.

How does your gobbler measure up to the number one birds? According to NWTF records, the top eastern wild turkey from Florida scored 71.500 and the top Osceola wild turkey scored 83.500. The new records should be out about the time this is printed. However, it will take some exceptional gobblers to top these scores.

If you have questions or need help scoring your gobbler, contact your nearest GFC regional office. For more information about the NWTF's scoring procedure or to have your bird recognized, call them at 1-800-THE-NWTF (1-800-843-6983).



The Sleeper Awakens

By Frank A. Morello

The topwater plug produced a loud "plop" as the angler flipped it beneath the mangrove branches overhanging the banks of the Loxahatchee River. On the third tug of the retrieve, a fish attacked the plug.

While the ensuing struggle was impressive on light tackle, the angler quickly realized that his adversary lacked the size and fighting ability of a lunker bass. A quick glance at the struggling fish produced a puzzled look by the angler. His confusion increased after the fish was netted and examined. However, his fishing partner grinned and proudly explained he knew what the fish was. He had caught one a year ago and carried it to the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) office for identification.

Another angler called GFC's Everglades office to report that he had been bream fishing with worms in a canal and caught a fish that looked like a cross between a bass, bowfin (mudfish) and a walleye. Now that's a strange combination.

Other callers have given similar descriptive mixes, sometimes including a resemblance to gar or other species. It is unknown how many bewildered anglers catch this particular fish.

For those of you who have not guessed the identity of this mystery fish, it is the bigmouth sleeper, and its smaller cousin is the fat sleeper. The uniqueness of this fish's preferred habitat limits its distribution to coastal areas, associated canals, rivers and streams from southern Florida to the Panhandle, which is why anglers are unfamiliar with sleepers.

Catches have been made on various baits, including live baits, spinners, flies and plugs. Many of these reports come from anglers with many years of experience who are seeing this fish for the first time.

This species belongs to a family of fishes with world-wide tropical and sub-tropical distribution. Seven species occur in the southern United States, two of which are found in Florida. Of these two, one is the bigmouth sleeper and the other is its smaller "cousin" the fat sleeper. Both prefer tidewater streams and canals. They are mostly found in fresh waters which are in close proximity to saline waters. Obviously, they have evolved utilizing an environment intermediate between that of "purely freshwater" species and "purely marine" species.

The bigmouth sleeper seldom exceeds 20 inches. The body is elongated from head to tail (similar to bass), and cylindrical from mid-body to the head (similar to bowfin), being more compressed toward the tail. The caudal (tail) fin is rounded (similar to gar). There are two separate dorsal fins (similar to walleye). Fat sleepers may reach nine inches or more in length. As the name implies, fat sleepers are much chubbier than bigmouth sleepers.

Sleepers are piscivores, meaning they eat other fish. They are susceptible to lures commonly used for other predators such as freshwater bass and saltwater snook, both of which may share the same waters with the sleepers. The preferred feeding technique of these secretive fish, is by ambush. Concealing themselves in brush, weeds, rocks or other structures, they wait for other fish to swim within range, then strike with great speed to catch their prey.

Compared with popular freshwater species such as bass, bream, crappie or catfish, sleepers have less angling interest. How many people have you heard declare they were going sleeper fishing? Larger specimens provide good table fare, and there are no daily bag limits or length restrictions. In the meantime, if you catch one incidentally, you will know the name of that strange looking fish.

Frank A. Morello is a biological administrator in the GFC's Everglades region.

Delicious Fish Recipes

FLORIDA WILDLIFE has received a number of requests to publish wildlife recipes. Mary Beth Savage, the magazine's circulation and promotion manager, has collected a number of delicious and easy-to-prepare recipes from Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission employees and spouses. The following catfish, mullet and bass recipes taken from her collection are made from readily available Florida fish. Bon appetit.

– Dick Sublette, editor

FISH SUPREME

1 lb. fish fillets
(cut into bite-sized pieces)
1/4 cup flour
1/8 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. pepper
1/4 pound bacon (5-6 strips)
2 tbsp. chopped onion
1 1/2 cup tomato juice/V-8
1 tsp. dry mustard
1/4 tsp. parsley flakes
1/4 garlic powder
1/2 cup sour cream

Mix flour, salt and pepper. Fry bacon until crisp & remove bacon to drain. Saute onion in bacon fat. Coat fish in flour mix & add to onion. Cook until very lightly browned (about 5 minutes on medium heat). Meanwhile, combine all remaining ingredients except sour cream. Reduce heat and add tomato mix. Simmer 5-10 minutes until thickened. Remove from heat, stir in sour cream & serve. Very nice over toast or puff pastry shells. Serves about 4.

PUNGENT BASS

4 bass fillets
4 strips bacon
1/2 cup chili sauce
1/4 cup ketchup
2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
1 tbsp. horseradish sauce
Juice of 1 lemon

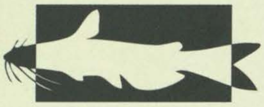
Sprinkle fillets with salt. Combine other ingredients, except bacon. Place fish in baking dish, cover with sauce and top with bacon. Bake at 400 degrees for 30 minutes.

– From FLORIDA WILDLIFE, March/April 1983

CATFISH CHOWDER

2 lbs. catfish fillets
2 cups fish stock
2 cups light cream or milk
4 potatoes, peeled and diced
2 stalks celery, diced, with leaves
2 tsp. salt
1 clove minced garlic
2 medium onions, sliced
1/4 cup butter
1/2 tsp. white pepper
1/2 cup sherry

Saute onions and celery in bacon drippings until tender. Add all other ingredients except milk and cook over medium heat until potatoes are done. Add milk, heat on low. Do not let milk get too hot.



SMOKED MULLET DIP

2 smoked mullet or smoked mackerel
1 cup mayonnaise
1 medium lime
1 tsp. fresh lime rind (rind only, no white pulp!)
2 tbsp. horseradish
2 tsp. Louisiana Hot Sauce (to taste)
1 tbsp. Morton's Seasoned Salt (blue and green bottle)
2 tbsp. chopped parsley
1 tbsp. celery seed
1 tsp. Paprika
Optional: Reserve a smoked fish tail (an attractive one, if possible), 1 olive and several slices of lime.

Remove smoked fish meat from carcass, being cautious to remove bones. Finely chop meat to pulverize any remaining small bones that you missed. Carefully shave the rind from a lime, being careful to avoid the bitter white pulp, and chop rind very fine. Squeeze lime juice over meat. Mix all ingredients except paprika. Place in serving dish and garnish with paprika and parsley. Serve with saltine crackers. Makes about 2 cups. For an alternative presentation, slightly reduce the amount of mayo you add so as to achieve a pate' consistency and, on an oval serving tray, mold pate' into shape of a fish, insert smoked fish tail at tail end, use thin (1-inch) slices of lime for the gill, pectoral and dorsal fins, add an olive for the eye.

– Contributed by Dennis David

Florida Snipe Hunting

By Bryan J. Burhans

Not only are snipe abundant in Florida, they definitely challenge your wing-shooting skills.

ROB CURTIS

A flock of crows echoed in the distance as we slipped on hip boots still wet from our hunt the day before. Before us lay a newly created clear-cut. A recent logging operation removed all the vegetation, leaving a 200-acre opening with exposed mud – perfect snipe habitat.

The four of us spread out 40 yards apart and started slogging through the mud. "Bird up!" yelled Matt.

Two more snipe immediately lifted off, following the lead bird out of gun range. We watched as the birds settled in a small stand of uncut cypress in the center of the clear-cut. As we angled towards the cypress, a group of six more snipe flushed. Shouldering my shotgun, a load of #7 $^1/_2$ shot stopped the closest bird as the other five took refuge in the cypress stand.

The action intensified as we approached the cypress stand. Matt and Rob circled around the east end while Doug and I covered the west side. Two quick shots from Matt and Rob's side bagged one bird. Ten birds flushed right in front of Doug, who connected with a double, while I skillfully missed an easy crossing shot. Four birds in 15 minutes – that's action.

Not only are snipe abundant in Florida, they definitely challenge your wing-shooting skills. As central Florida snipe hunter Mark Banker puts it, "Snipe are so fast they make a flushed covey of quail look like they are flying in slow motion."

Flip Pallot, producer and host of Walker Kay Chronicals, an outdoors show that regularly appears on ESPN, agrees with Banker's comparison. "Snipe have two speeds – wide open or tied to the dock. Snipe make quail look like they're tied together."

"Snipe hunting is the perfect opportunity all of us have to challenge ourselves and play the most difficult game in the sport of wing shooting," commented Pallot.

Although snipe are often taken incidentally by hunters pursuing other game such as quail, the challenge snipe provide is ample reason to make them your prime target. The key to finding snipe is to locate exposed wet ground.

According to wildlife biologist Nick Wiley, with the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, snipe prefer shallow wetlands such as the muddy fringes of marshes, ponds, wet pastures, road ditches and even a new clear-cut in a wet area. According to Wiley, snipe probe these moist soils searching for earthworms, snails and insects. However, Wiley notes that habitat conditions for snipe can change quickly with periods of rain or drought.

Newly bedded pines also offer excellent snipe-hunting opportunities. Foresters use heavy equipment to pull the soil into mounds to create "beds", and then plant trees on top of the beds. The troughs between the beds often hold water during wet periods, creating favorable snipe habitat.

This is a great place to hunt until the

pines grow so high you can't see over their tops. Hunting this type of area will challenge your snap-shooting abilities. Once flushed, these aerial acrobats rocket over the tops of the trees and then, in a flash, drop out of sight almost as quickly as they appeared.

Wet pastures are great spots, especially where they border streams, ditches and ponds. Ponds and stands of cypress within pastures are always snipe hot spots.

And of course you will find some of the best snipe shooting along river and lake edges where there is exposed mud. According to Wiley, also look for productive snipe hunting around reservoirs where water levels are receding. The muddy flats created become snipe magnets.

Snipe often flush out of gun range, requiring some teamwork and technique to get birds in time. To do this Pallot hunts into the wind. When he flushes snipe they either flush to the side, offering a crossing shot, or if they flush into the wind, are slowed down just enough to allow a shot.

On a recent hunt on Relay Wildlife Management Area in central Florida we quickly became frustrated at how far ahead the birds were flushing. Taking advantage of snipe's habit of flying to cypress stands once flushed, we had shooters hide between two cypress stands while another hunter flushed the birds out of the other cypress stand. Those birds that flew to the other cypress stand often came within range of the hidden hunters.

"One great way to get a shot at a snipe that flushes out of range is to hunker down in nearby cover and watch the bird after it flushes. Often a snipe will circle and offer a shot as it swings around," commented Matt Kline, who traveled to Florida from Maryland for the hog hunting, but soon fell in love with the snipe hunting.

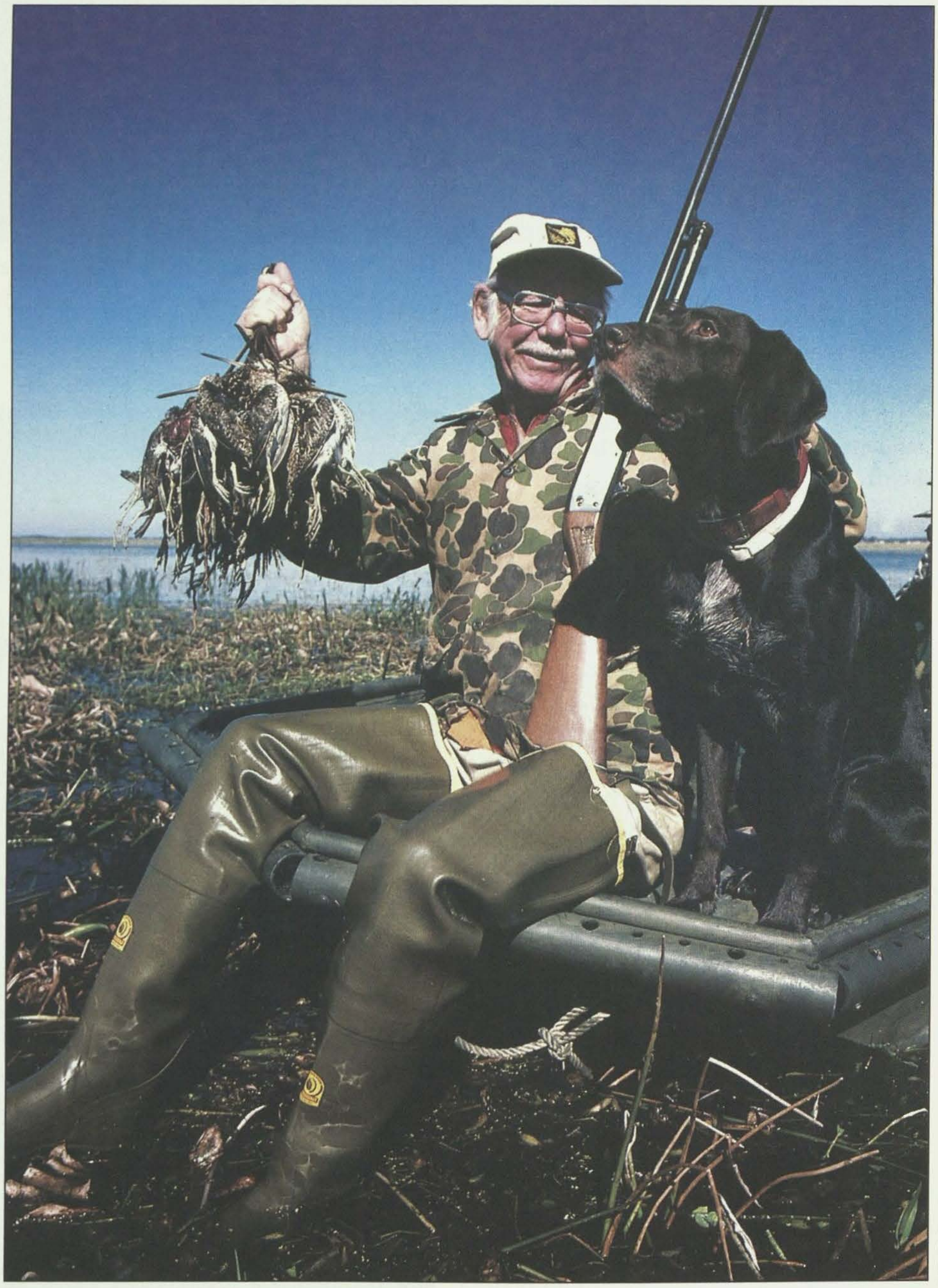
Kline said that during one hunt they almost never got close enough for a shot. But once, when the birds circled, a group of snipe started flying right towards them. As the lead bird came within range, Kline brought up his shotgun and connected: "The momentum of the bird carried it right toward me. I reached out and caught it as it fell. No problem retrieving that bird."

The simplicity and challenge of snipe hunting is one of its greatest attributes. No expensive dogs, equipment or 4 x 4 vehicle is needed.

"Difficulty for me means a smaller-gauge shotgun," explains Pallot. "I prefer to use 3-inch, No. 9 shot shells out of a .410-shotgun." For Pallot, the .410 enhances the degree of difficulty and is easy to carry. "Plus, I can carry more shells." And when you're snipe hunting, bring lots of shells.

Snipe hunting is inexpensive, challenging and available to everyone. "The value of the experience is not measured by the number of birds shot, rather it's another excuse to be afield and see natural Florida," concluded Pallot.

Bryan J. Burhans is a GFC biologist in West Palm Beach.



TIM TUCKER

Above: Hoisting a handful of snipe, this hunter savors the outdoors.
Page 22: Frequent visitors to wetlands, snipe offer challenging hunting. Please see William J. Weber's snipe photo on the back cover.

Can Panthers Return to North Florida?

By Frank H. Adams

Cougars and Florida panthers are closely related variations of a common genetic theme. But the two are alike enough to prove that if cougars could survive and thrive in their experimental home, so could Florida panthers.

On a beautiful blue day with temperatures floating in the 70s in February, 1993, a north Florida pine plantation above Lake City, Florida provided the setting for what could become a giant leap forward for Florida panthers.

This small step consisted of a quiet unhurried release of 10 mountain lions far from the madding crowds of this state's population centers. The study's aim was to see if it would be feasible someday to release Florida panthers in the locale, creating another breeding population outside the only one in south Florida.

This could be crucial to Florida panther recovery, since it's the only way to expand their distribution and substantially increase their numbers in the wild.

The good news is that the study proved it is feasible to re-introduce Florida panthers into that region. The tougher news is that it will take adroit diplomacy to convince some people in north Florida that releasing Florida panthers there will not be a detriment to them.

Cougars and Florida panthers are closley related variations of a common genetic theme. But the two are alike enough to prove that if cougars could survive and thrive in their experimental home, so could Florida panthers.

Wildlife researchers from the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) had been building up to this point for years, carefully studying the remaining 30 to 50 of wild Florida panthers. The release of cougarss was a pivotal point for the researchers.

"There were sensations of mystery mixed with anticipation," said Walter McCown, a researcher with the GFC's Wildlife Research Laboratory in Gainesville. "There was the excitement of the beginning of something, which if successful, could go a long way to the recovery of the Florida panther."

These large cats had been transported to the site and put in holding pens prior to their release. Their pen doors were opened and researchers waited some distance away to see what happened.

"A few left when we opened the

GFC

GFC

Above: Cougar T-33 on the bank of the Suwannee River.
Page 24: Cougar T-37 being released in the Osceola National Forest.

doors (to their pens) and slowly walked away," McCown said. "Others waited and left in the night." It took several days for the last of these cats to leave the release site.

The cougars were allowed to leave on their own with no human hubbub to spook them. The goal was to make their departure into Florida's wilds as natural as possible to see how the big cats would blend in to their new surroundings.

What led to this point required over a decade of studying Florida panthers in the wild. And a previous release of mountain lions had been done in the late 1980s.

Some of the animals in this stage of the game were captured in Texas and released in Florida within three months. Others were captured in Texas and held for three to eight years before their release. And a few were born and raised in enclosed wooded areas in Florida before they were let go.

This setup was to help the scientists discover what combination of backgrounds in Florida panthers would work best if it came down to the point of re-establishing them in north Florida.

The cougars were fitted with radio collars to allow researchers to keep track of the cats to check where they ranged, how and where they established their territories and to discover if there were any mortalities, among other things.

"We checked their positions once a day through April, 1993, and then three times a week after that," McCown said. "This was to have some sense of where they were going to settle. Also we thought problems with the animals would be more likely to occur more quickly."

Before the animals were released, the males had vasectomies to sterilize them so they would not breed females, introducing an accidental next generation of mountain lions outside their native habitat. However, like many human endeavors, this didn't work out exactly the way the researchers anticipated, and produced some accidental and very encouraging results.

And there were other unanticipated events in this experiment. But experiments are to find out what will happen, and scientists consider each part of an experiment a success, since they learn something they didn't know before.

One unanticipated complication was that the animals born and raised near humans didn't behave the same as ones reared totally in the wild.

"They were more casual around people. We found that kittens of females born and raised in captivity didn't know how to follow their mothers. Before, I guess all their needs and wants had been taken care of in 7-acre enclosures," McCown said.

Half as many captive-raised animals generated twice as many sightings by humans as the wild ones. The ones that were caught in the wild before their release tended to be much shyer concerning humans and tended to be seen in the woods or crossing dirt roads in the woods.

The human reactions to the sightings were mixed. Some people enjoyed it while others felt the cats posed a detriment to their security.

"We never had any documented cases of humans actually being harmed by the cats," McCown said. "We got a lot of people calling up saying they (the cats) had done this or that, and it turned out they were dogs or coyotes or bobcats."

But some people enjoyed the presence of these impressive felines and asked what they could do to help. Some asked that more cougars be released.

"There was a quail plantation owner in south Georgia who began finding tracks," McCown said. "Eventually he contacted us and said he wished they were successful, and if we wanted to turn 10 more loose on his property we were welcome."

As far as those concerned over the project, McCown said: "I got to know some of them and they were quite personable. I understood their concerns but hoped that we could solve their dilemmas in the future."

After the initial release of 10 cougars, another nine were released during the study to determine the feasibility of adding new animals to an established social structure. This also helped bolster the ranks of the cats, by stimulating reproduction in the experimental population, which suffered some mortalities.

Five of 19 cougars released into northern Florida died during the study. Two were illegally shot, two were ▷

GFC

After a treatment for an arrow wound, cougar T-40 was released in Pauk's Pasture Wildlife Management Area in Brunswick, Georgia.

killed on highways and one was killed in a snare. When one of the cats died, researchers tried to be emotionally neutral, but sometimes that wasn't easy.

"It depends on each individual case," said Chris Belden, a biologist from the GFC's Wildlife Research Laboratory. "Hopefully we're objectively trying to evaluate the viability. But when you find a cat that you've been tracking for two years has been run over on the highway it's somewhat of a disappointment."

One cat lost was a 3-year-old male which couldn't be located by radio-tracking devices. As it turned out the cat had been killed with a bow and arrow and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources arrested a suspect who confessed to shooting it.

Another male cat showed little movement for some time in his territory in Levy County, in north Florida. When researchers found him they discovered he had been shot and was only able to drag himself along with his front legs, and they had to euthenize him. To date, no suspect has been arrested.

But beyond these setbacks, there was an unanticipated development that turned out to be an unexpected boon.

"There were five kittens born in four litters. It didn't hurt the experiment at all and actually helped," said Belden.

"It showed the habitat supported the experiment...that the females could raise kittens and the kittens could learn to survive," Belden said.

"The production of the kittens was the most unexpected part of the study. All the males had vasectomies," Belden said.

The wildlife scientists located the male cat in question and tested the cat to see if the vasectomy had taken. It turned out the mountain lion was producing no sperm when they tested him.

"Our hypothesis at that point was that he had residual sperm" Belden said. "When we got other litters, it became obvious that he had not been successfully vasectomized."

Of the two kittens born in the experiment, two died accidentally. One was hit by an automobile, and the other died when it was hit with a tranquilizer dart when researchers were trying to put a radio collar on it. The kitten drowned in a puddle of water and field researchers revived it, but it later died. Sometimes things like that happen no matter how careful scientists are.

One interesting aspect of the project was the distance some of the animals wandered during the experiment. From their original release point near Yulee, Florida, some wandered many hundreds of miles during their quest, reaching well into Georgia.

Apparently curiosity isn't just a quality of house cats, termed "*Felis domestica*," but also belongs to their larger wild cousins, mountain lions, scientifically known as "*Fellis concolor*."

Every fact researchers learned during this experiment put them one step closer to re-establishing Florida panthers in part of their former domain. One of the points of this was to find out if the cats could be re-established there to protect the species in case something disastrous happened to the breeding population in south Florida.

"It's just one small part of our effort of our agency to prevent extinction of the species," said Tom Logan, endangered species coordinator for the GFC. "It's a research activity to gather information on additional ways to help (them) recover or prevent (their) extinction.

"The ultimate misconception was that the project failed because the unexpected came up," he said. "It was a tremendous success because we found out some unexpected things. The greatest success was the unexpected production of the kittens.

"We found they could find enough food, there was enough of the right habitat and they established territories in the area where we released them," Logan said. "There's no question in my mind we could establish a successful population (of Florida panthers) there."

Logan and others with the study said the biggest hurdle they have to leap over at this point is a sociological one, caused by perceptions some people in the area have over the presence of these large cats.

"Until these fears and perceptions can be addressed in a way that's satisfactory to these people, we can't consider reintroduction," he said.

"This is a problem we can't ignore. These are the people who will be living there and their concerns have got to be addressed," Logan said. "We need to find a way to go to them and meet their needs."

Frank H. Adams is the associate editor of FLORIDA WILDLIFE magazine.

A Well -Traveled Fish

By Michael Wisenbaker

A region of the North Atlantic that covers 2 million square miles of cobalt ocean known as the Sargasso Sea serves as sort of United Nations for eels. This sea, defined by the ocean's clockwise circulation pattern, lies southwest of Bermuda between the West Indies and the Azores in the mid Atlantic. Drawn there for reasons we can't fathom, these unlikely looking fish from eastern North America, Europe and the Mediterranean congregate to mate, spawn and eventually die.

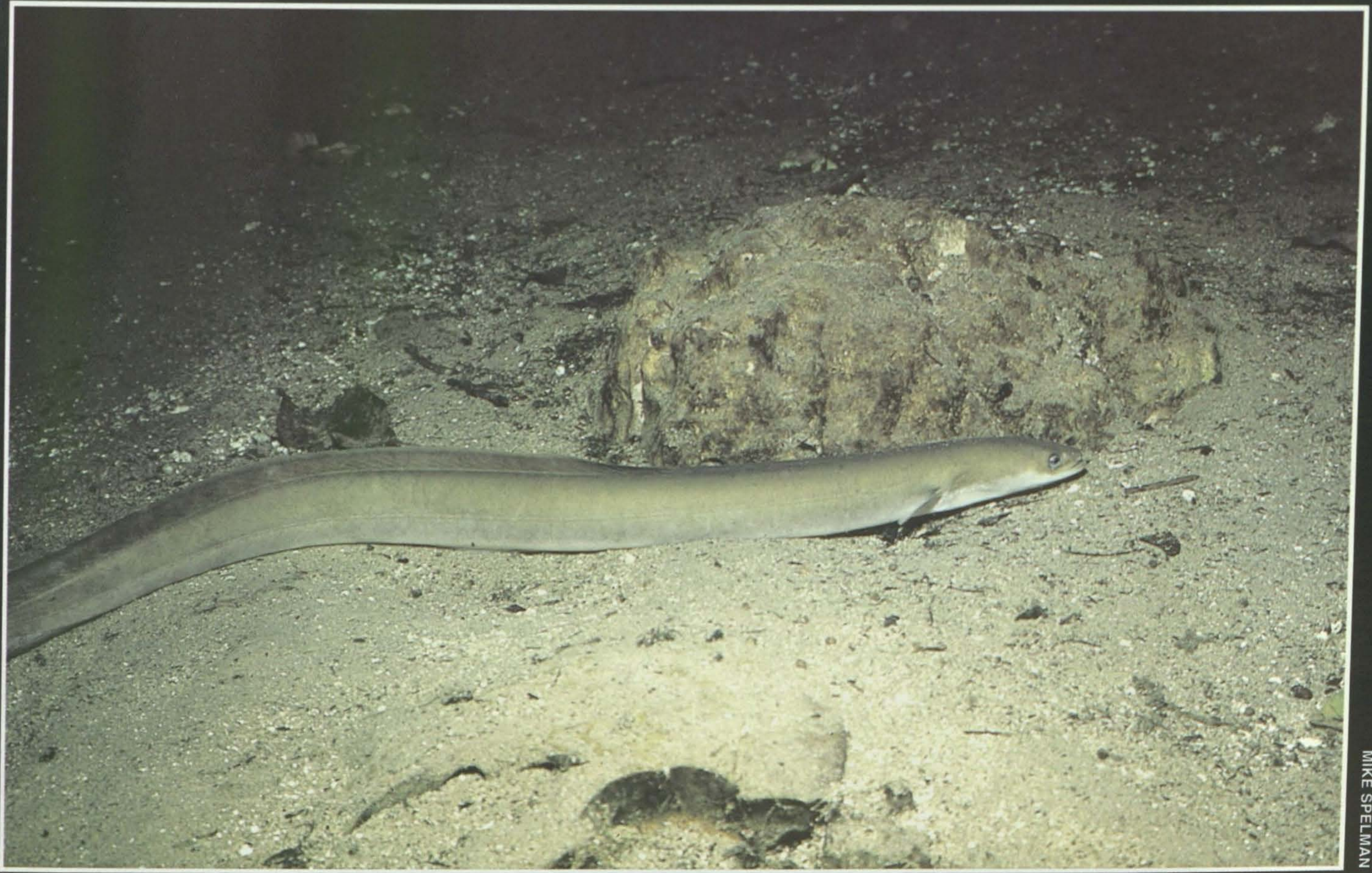
Dr. George Burgess, a biologist at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville, explains that American eels and their relatives are catadromous. This means they spend most of their lives in brackish water or freshwater but return to the Sargasso Sea to spawn. In other words, you might think of them as "salmon in reverse." These well-traveled fish are the only ones in the Americas that do this.

From the mysterious Sargasso, their offspring embark on a daunting sojourn to their respective haunts where they may remain for as long as 40 years before returning to their birthplace.

If not for their eyes, these eel larvae would be almost invisible. They resemble willow leaves more than fish. Scientists knew so little about these tiny transparent forms before 1900 that they classified them as a separate species known as *Leptocephalus morrisi*.

Finally, Johannes Schmidt, a Danish fisheries officer, resolved this issue. He discovered these animals were a larval form of eels. He also found that the animals gradually drift to the edges of the Sargasso Sea where currents eventually catch and carry them close to where they'll spend most of their lives.

In the spring, about 15 months or so after they're born, they have drifted near streams and estuaries along the continent. Known as glass eels at this ▶



MIKE SPELMAN

stage – because you can still see through them – the creatures now have fins enabling them to swim and have taken the shape of adult eels.

Glass eels can assume characteristics of either gender and split into two groups upon approaching freshwater. While some stay in tidal areas along the coast and become males, others move upstream into creeks, rivers and lakes and become females.

After developing color, they are known as "elvers," rarely reaching a length of more than 3.5 inches. They slowly evolve into "yellow eels," characterized by a murky yellow-green color that grades into a pale underside. Yellow eels are what divers often see writhing about in Florida's freshwater springs.

Within a decade or so, and some speculate for a much longer period, yellow eels undergo still another remarkable change, which includes developing special cells for riding their bodies of excessive sea salts and forming enlarged eyes. This prepares them for the long swim to the Sargasso Sea.

Their yellow-green covering changes into a metallic sheen, with their backs turning purplish black. Called "silver eels" at this stage, the new color scheme better camouflages them from oceanic predators. No longer freshwater creatures of the night, they have now become marine fish.

From late summer to November, most silver eels leave inland waterways. Males join females when the latter reach estuaries. Together, during the dark phases of the moon, they follow the siren call that draws them home.

By mid-winter, throngs of eels meet in the depths of the distant Sargasso Sea. After making this difficult voyage, they lay millions of eggs. Soon afterward, the silver eels die where they were hatched. Their offspring then begin this cycle anew.

American eels (*Anguilla rostrata*) represent the only member of this genus in the western hemisphere. At least 14 other species of this fish occur elsewhere in the world.

American eels range from Greenland to northern South America. In Canada and the U.S., they may travel 1,000 miles or more up tributaries that flow into the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Eels scale dams, wriggle through aquaducts and navigate subterranean streams to reach their destinations. Sometimes they even crawl over dew-drenched fields – winding up in lakes with no links to the sea. These well-traveled fish occupy reservoirs, mats of vegetation, spaces under rocks and limestone voids. Eels constitute one of a few fish species known as troglophiles that can live in underwater caves.

My curiosity about eels developed in the 1970s when I began noticing them in the caverns of our state's freshwater springs. Generally, eels and yellow bullheads are the fish most often seen by divers in the dark zones of submerged labyrinths. These strange-looking fish often peer at you as you silently fin your way through serpentine passages and massive rooms of limestone. Eels often lurk in crevices and fissures on the floors, ceilings and walls, waiting until dark before they emerge and eerily undulate toward cave mouths.

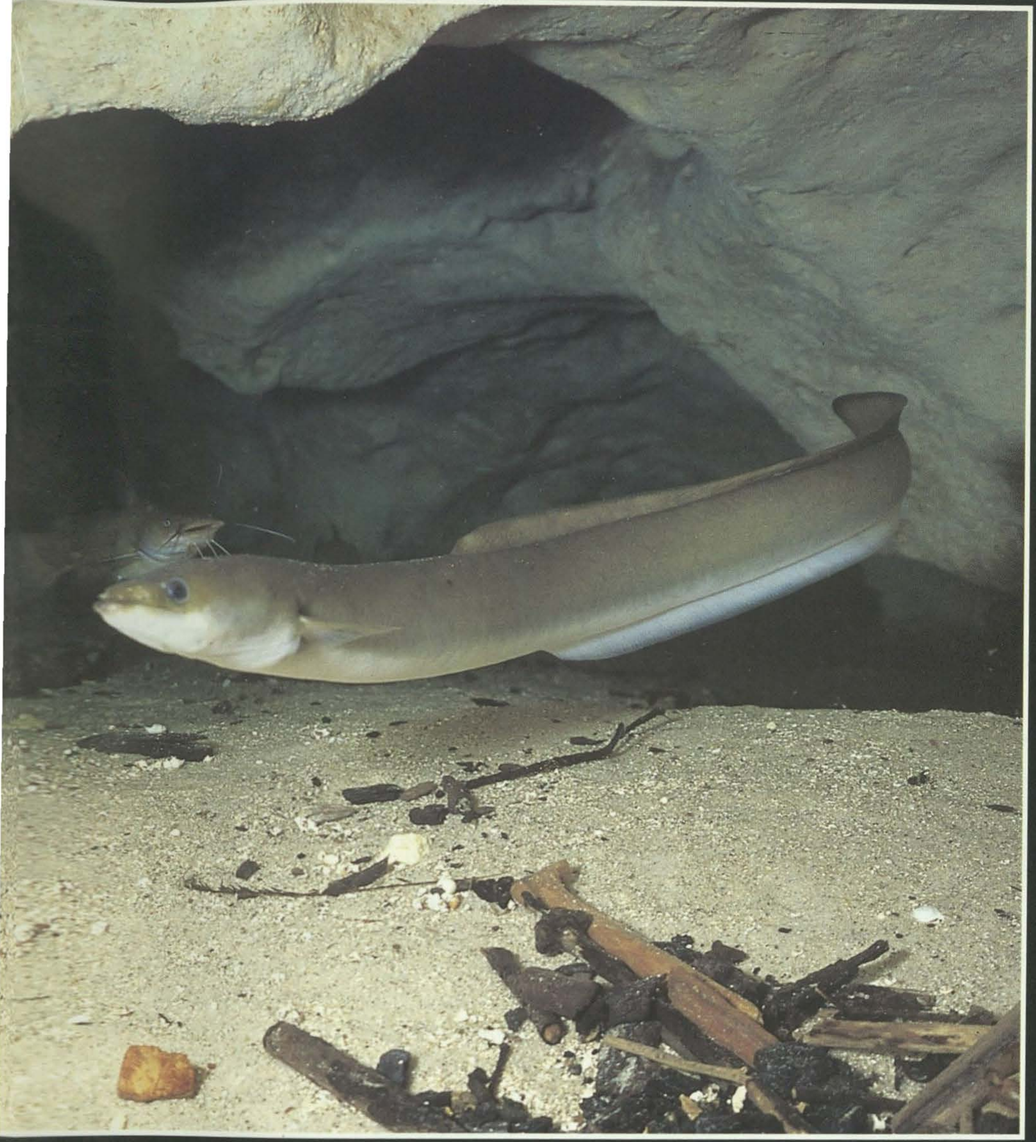
On my hundreds of dives into springs and sinkholes, I've never had any unpleasant encounters with them, except when they careened off my faceplate. Other divers have also seen them nipping at the chrome on tank valves and regulators.

Dr. Jan Hoover, an ichthyologist who works for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Experiment Station in Vicksburg, Mississippi, says eels have small, setiform (bristlelike) teeth that grasp but cannot cut. This means that they have to attack larger prey by chomping down on them and then spinning the victims, just as crocodiles do. In so doing, the eels extract a plug – or a fish McNugget – as Jan put it. He recalls one eel specialist saying that these fish can spin at a rate greater than that of the fastest figure skater. In short, unless you are worried about being gummed to death, divers have little to fear from eels.

A recent study of eels at Vortex Spring about 100 miles west of Tallahassee, shed light on their feeding

Hooking it's tail into a rock wall's nook, this American eel cuts in front of a catfish cruising a submerged cave. Page 27: This aquatic eel graces the bottom of a crystaline spring.

At dusk, like aquatic vampires, they came out of the spring's cavern and tunnel to forage around the surface pool before returning to their shadowy haunts at dawn.



MIKE SPELMAN

habits. It revealed that mature eels fed at night and were idle during the day. At dusk, like aquatic vampires, they came out of the spring's cavern and tunnel to forage around the surface pool before returning to their shadowy haunts at dawn. Conversely, younger eels fed at the mouth of the spring during the day. The researchers believe that as eels grow older their vision in low light improves – thus allowing them to feed at night.

At a glimpse, they look more like snakes than fish – being long and round, with ribbon-like fins fused into one along their backs and tails. Until the turn of the last century, even scientists thought eels were some type of snake. American eels may reach lengths of 4 feet, although males rarely exceed 2 feet, and weigh up to 7 pounds.

Their ability to secrete a heavy white mucous when upset may lend to their reputation of being slimy. Those who often handle them, though, say they feel like soft velvet.

Eels have one of the most highly developed senses of smell among animals. This might explain how they survive even in the dark, far reaches of caves. They devour living or dead creatures such as insects (larvae and adults), smaller fish, worms, mollusks, crustaceans and salamanders.

While many Americans view them as "trash" fish, eels have been a highly prized food since the days of the Roman Empire. They are eaten in parts of Asia, Europe and Latin America.

Many Japanese believe that eating eels rejuvenates the spirits worn down by the heat of summer. So they began celebrating an annual festival that features gorging on eels.

Gourmets in Germany, Holland and England delight their palates with smoked eel, but the fish must be delivered live to European eateries where this delicacy is served.

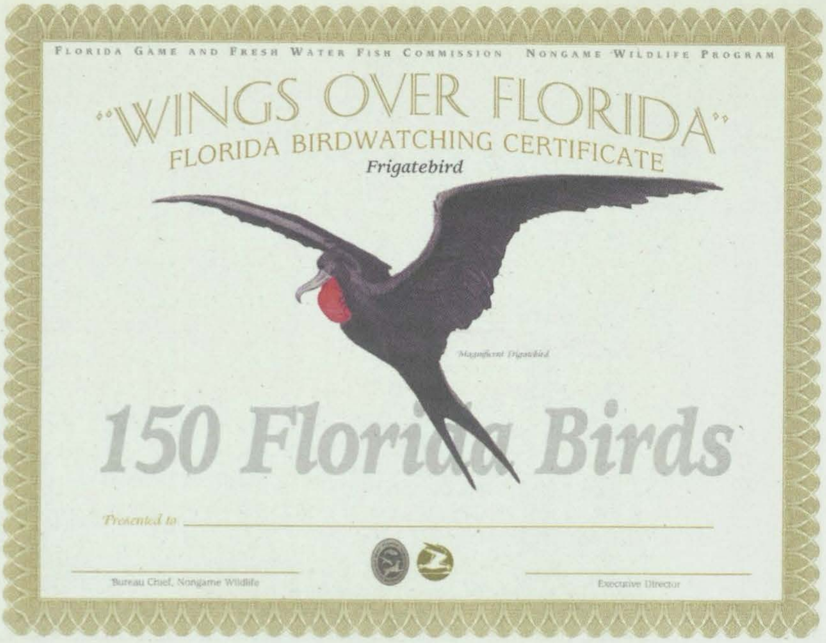
Though you're unlikely to catch many eels with a hook and line, commercial fishers who know when and where to find eel runs capture them by the thousands with nets and traps. One eel fishery in Quebec has exported 350 tons of eels to various parts of the world annually. Some complaints have arisen that eels are being overfished along the east coast from Chesapeake Bay to Canada's maritime provinces. If this should turn out to be a serious problem, a solution may be at hand. Eel farms have existed throughout the world for more than 2,000 years.

Eels provide much more than just food for human consumption. The skins of American eels once were a source for quality book bindings and buggy whips. In Japan, shoes, wallets and brief cases are sometimes made from eel hides. Eels also serve as animal fodder, fertilizer and an ingredient in some glues.

We've learned a lot about eels since Aristotle proclaimed them sexless beings that arose from the "entrails of the sea" and Pliny the Elder insisted that they reproduced by rubbing against rocks. Medieval folk tales even led some to believe that larval eels came from the hairs of horses' tails or the dews of May mornings.

Yet many facts about the only species of this well-traveled fish found throughout Florida's freshwaters remain one of nature's best kept secrets. For as Johannes Schmidt opined in 1912, "the whole story of the eel has come to read almost like a romance, wherein reality has far exceeded the dreams of fantasy."

Michael Wisenbaker is a Tallahassee-based writer who frequently covers nature.



FLORIDA GAME AND FRESH WATER FISH COMMISSION NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

"WINGS OVER FLORIDA"

FLORIDA BIRDWATCHING CERTIFICATE

Frigatebird

Magnificent Frigatebird

150 Florida Birds

Presented to ______

Bureau Chief, Nongame Wildlife

Executive Director

Wings Over Florida Awards

By Dick Sublette, editor

The first bird-watching certificates ever issued by the State of Florida were announced by Alex Kropp, The Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's (GFC) birding project manager. The 77 certificates awarded since October 22 and prior to January 1 represent enthusiastic bird-watching in every part of the state.

"The purpose behind *Wings Over Florida* is twofold: to encourage beginning birders to elevate their birding skills to the next achievement level, and to develop a database of Florida's more advanced birders," said Kropp.

Marjorie S. Wilkinson of Saint Petersburg is one of eight people who achieved the caracara level, the program's top honor, with 350 or more bird sightings in Florida.

Wilkinson has been birding actively for the past 15 years and is delighted with the beautiful GFC certificate. As a retired school teacher transplanted from Tennessee, she keeps close track of the birds she observes. Her favorite guide is the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to Birds of North America.*

"Merritt Island is the best place to spot a variety of birds," according to Wilkinson. She also favors the Panhandle region and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in particular. She says that Pinellas County and especially the Ft. DeSoto Park at Tampa Bay afford her many bird sightings. "I enjoy birding all over Florida, including the Everglades and the Florida Keys."

For an application, a revised GFC bird check list or more information about *Wings Over Florida*, the GFC Birdwatching Certificate Program, write Alex Kropp, Birding Projects Manager, Bureau of Nongame Wildlife, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, 620 S. Meridian, Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600, or call (904) 414-7929.

CARACARA More than 350 birds

Charles W. Biggs	Winter Park
Dan L. Canterbury	Auburndale
Byrum W. Cooper	Winter Haven
Charles Geanangel	Lake Alfred
Al Liberman	West Palm Beach
Barbara Liberman	West Palm Beach
Richard Novier	Palm Bay
Marjorie S. Wilkinson	St. Petersburg

PAINTED BUNTING 250-349 birds

Dorothy Bailey	Englewood
Robert E. Brekelbaum	Sunrise
Kathleen Burkhart	Miami Beach
Eugenia Carey	Port St. Lucie
Al Hansen	Spring Hill
Bev Hansen	Spring Hill
Linda Harrison	Jacksonville Beach
Victor J. Heller	Tallahassee
Michael J. Hill	Tallahassee
Dottie Hull	Port St. Lucie
Hank Hull	Port St. Lucie
Jerry Krummrich	Lake City
Bill Lamoureux	Tampa
Janet R. Lloyd	Pensacola
Dotti MacVicar	Tallahassee

Keith MacVicar	Tallahassee
Tony Menart	Panama City
Lt. Col. C.W. Milmore	Pensacola
Pamela J. Novier	Palm Bay
Tom Palmer	Lakeland
Fred Phillips	Ormond Beach
Malcolm Simons	Port Charlote
Sandra Turner	Lyman
Eddie White	Tallahassee
Caroline W. Wyatt	Amelia Island

FRIGATEBIRD 150-249 birds

B.A. Allen	Interlachen
Dorothy Apgar	Flagler Beach
Karla L. Balent	Gainesville
Lloyd Clyburn	Georgetown
Michael P. Eagan	Lakeland
Richard Hartwell	Naples
Janet Hill	Placida
Harry Hooper	Tallahassee
Gary Hughes	Miami
June Huss	Fort Myers
Edwin J. Keppner	Panama City
Lisa Keppner	Panama City
Jorge Khuly	Miami
Carol Lahy	Winter Springs
Austin R. Lawrence	Palm Coast
Jean R. Lewis	Stuart
Francis S. MacNutt	Jacksonville
Robert Maglievaz	Land O' Lakes
William H. Marsh	Ellenton
Nellie T. Ross	Winter Haven
Burnwell C. Ryckman	Fort Myers
Gerie Spencer	Edgewater
John Spencer	Edgewater
Ann D. Turner	Jacksonville
Joy L. Viskochil	Melbourne
John W. Wenzel	Sarasota
Donna White	Tallahassee

CHICKADEE 50-149 birds

Jack Bluemke	New Smyrna Beach
Maynard H. Cox	Orange Park
Stuart Cumberbatch	Tallahassee
Joseph Evetts	Cocoa Beach
Ann Fearns	Lecanto
Marty Hale	Eustis
Judith Hayes	Miami
Mitzi G. Higgins	Orange Park
Stuart Hills	Sarasota
John H. Olsen	Stuart
Frank Pennetti	Hollywood
Donald Schaeffer	DeLand
James H. Scharer	Pensacola
Susan D. Seyboldt	Tallahassee
Rosemary Tiberio	Lake Wales
Tom Trettis	Naples
N.B. Wilcox	Pensacola

FLORIDA GAME AND FRESH WATER FISH COMMISSION NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

"WINGS OVER FLORIDA"

FLORIDA BIRDWATCHING CERTIFICATE

Caracara

Crested Caracara

350 Florida Birds

Executive Director

FLORIDA GAME AND FRESH WATER FISH COMMISSION NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

"WINGS OVER FLORIDA"

FLORIDA BIRDWATCHING CERTIFICATE

Chickadee

Carolina Chickadee

50 Florida Birds

Presented to

Bureau Chief, Nongame Wildlife

FLORIDA GAME AND FRESH WATER FISH COMMISSION NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

"WINGS OVER FLORIDA"

FLORIDA BIRDWATCHING CERTIFICATE

Bunting

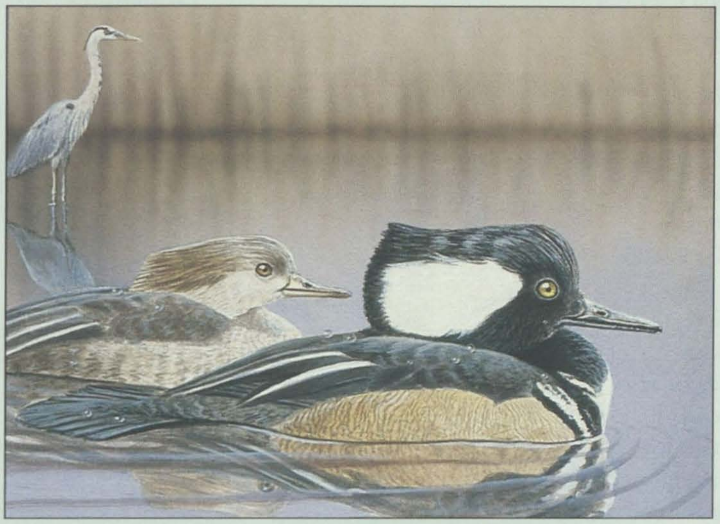
Painted Bunting

250 Florida Birds

Presented to

Bureau Chief, Nongame Wildlife

Executive Director

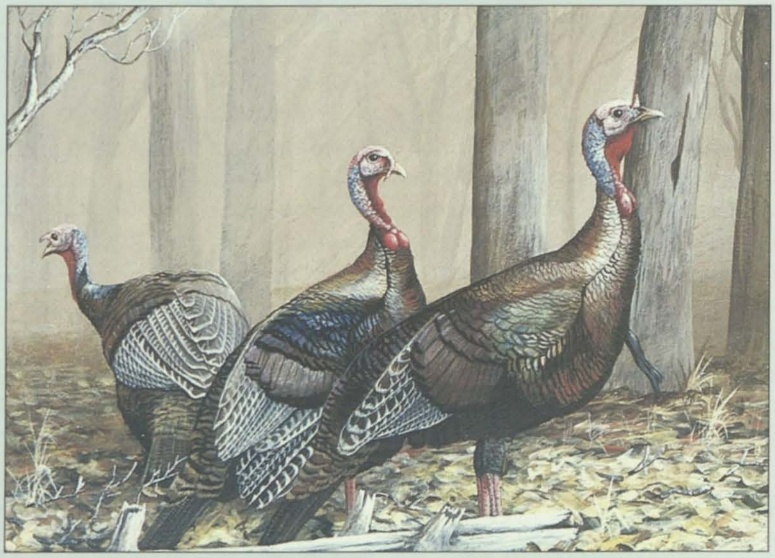


1997-98 WATERFOWL STAMP WINNER

Michael Frase's artistic interpretation of a pair of hooded mergansers captured the first-place award in the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's Florida Waterfowl Stamp design competition. His design will be used on the 1997-1998 Florida waterfowl stamp.

The stamps will feature his painting and are scheduled to go on sale July 1 at county tax collectors' offices. They will cost $3, plus the agent's fee.

Limited edition prints of Frase's painting and artist's proofs may be purchased from: Michael P. Frase, 5314 W. Maple Ave., Swartz Creek, MI 48473. His phone number is (810) 732-4108.



1997-98 TURKEY STAMP WINNER

This year's first-place winner of the Florida Turkey Stamp design competition was Stephen Koury, who painted an opaque watercolor rendition of a group of Osceola turkeys. Koury's design will grace Florida's 1997-1998 turkey stamp.

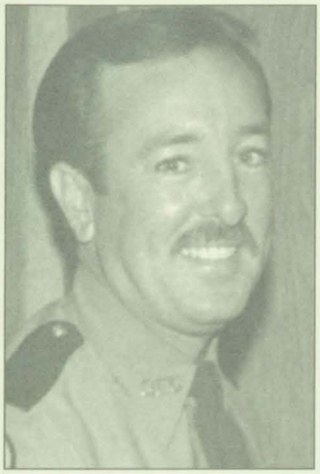
The stamps will be available from county tax collectors beginning July 1 for $5, plus the agent's fee.

Artist proofs and limited edition prints may be purchased from: Stephen Koury, 1029 Rustic Estates Drive, Lakeland, FL 33811. His phone number is (941) 647-1490

ART PHOTOGRAPHED BY WILLIAM A. GREER

CONSERVATION UPDATE

Compiled by Frank H. Adams



Tom Haworth

Lt. John Reed

GFC

GFC OFFICERS WIN AWARDS

Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) Wildlife Officer Tom Haworth won a GFC Heroism/Valor Award in 1996. During his 11 years with the GFC, Haworth has saved three people's lives and crawled into a wrecked car to treat a young woman who had serious head injuries.

His life-saving actions include giving CPR to a male driver in a car accident who had a severe head injury, treating a youthful burn victim and reviving an 80-year-old female motorist who had an asthma attack.

"Through these incidents, officer Haworth has demonstrated a very genuine and real concern for the welfare of others, even at the expense of his own personal safety," wrote Lt. Colonel Randy Hopkins, director of the GFC's law enforcement branch, in his recommendation that Haworth receive the award.

Lieutenant John Reed, a law enforcement watch commander with the GFC's Everglades Region, won a GFC Personal Initiative Award in 1996. Reed won the award for going above and beyond the call of duty many times.

Most notably, Reed has helped raise funds for law-enforcement officers and their families who have been stricken by unexpected hardships and tragedies. Each year he works in several benefits that raise thousands of dollars for this cause.

In the early 1990s, Reed raised over $50,000 for wildlife officer Robert Carmichael's family, and that led to the foundation of the Law Enforcement Assistance Program. The organization assists law enforcement officers from all agencies and their families who have been stricken by hardships and death.

FLORIDA WILDLIFE CONTEST DEADLINES

The 1997 cover art contest submissions must be postmarked by Wednesday, May 14.

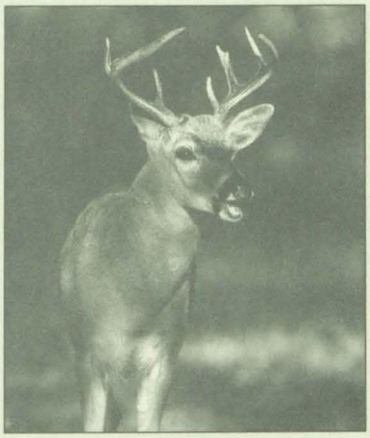
The annual wildlife photo contest entries must be postmarked by Monday, June 16.

For contest information contact FLORIDA WILDLIFE at the address, phone number or E-Mail address listed inside the front cover.

WELCOME BACK SONGBIRD UPDATE

The Saturday, April 26, Songbird event will be held at Canaveral National Seashore near New Smyrna Beach on Route A1A. An incorrect venue was listed in the last issue of FLORIDA WILDLIFE. Contact Joni Blakeslee, at the GFC Ocala Office at (352) 732-1225.

Other Songbird events are scheduled on Saturday, April 19 at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, near Tallahassee, contact Susan Cerulean at (904) 488-4676; and Chinsegut Nature Center, near Brooksville, contact Susan Sharpley-Evans (941) 648-3203.



LARRY LIPSKY

MORE KEY DEER DIE

An all-time high of 100 endangered Key Deer died during 1996, up from 1995's record total of 94. Only between 250 to 300 of these tiny deer remain, and wildlife officials in the Keys are concerned.

Barry Stieglitz, manager of the National Key Deer Refuge, has been disappointed with the death rate of Key deer, since he had hoped stepping up traffic control during '96 would reduce their number of deaths.